Seirei Tsukai no Blade Dance Volume 6

source : https://www.baka-tsuki.org/project/index.php?title=Seirei_Tsukai_no_Blade_Dance:Volume_6

追憶の闇精霊

剣精霊

ブレイドダンサー

無使い

6

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追憶の闇精霊

精霊使いの剣舞 ブレイドダンス 6

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Illustration
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「も、もう少し、
このままでもかまわないぞ……」
「……え？」
エリスを押し倒した姿勢のまま、
カミトは目を見開く。

（な、なんだ、この気まずい雰囲気は……！）
ゴクリと息を呑み、カミトは視線を
チラッとクレアに向けた。
リボンをほどき、
髪をおろしたクレアは、
いつもよりちょっと大人びた魅力がある。

Claire Rouge
クレア・ルージュ

Kazhaya Kamito
カゼハヤ・カミト

レスティアは黄昏色の瞳で、
星屑を散りばめた夜空を見上げた。
「もうすぐ、教えてあげられる。
私とあなたが出会った本当の意味を――」

Resta
レスティア

精霊使いの剣舞 6

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Prologue

The world was being eroded by the black Wish.

"......tia..... Restia!"

I called out to her, reaching out with my hand, but it would no longer reach her.

I did not want something like the title of being the strongest.

If she stayed by my side and smiled for me, I would have been satisfied.

Even though—Even though I had only wanted to fulfill her wish.

"Kamito, I'm sorry, so....sorry....."

From within the mass of squirming darkness, I heard her voice.

She might have been crying—

The moment I thought that, I dove right into the black Wish without a single bit of hesitation.

—On that day, three years ago.

(What was it exactly, that I had wished for?)

Chapter 1 - The First Dawn

Part 1

Chirp chirp...

The singing of birds could be heard from the forest. A cold early morning that chilled one to the bones.

Chirp~

A soft sensation could be felt near his cheek--

Kamito woke up with a start.

He was surrounded by darkness. The light streaming into the tent was also rather weak.

Half awake, he was just about to get up from the simple bed--

"...!?"

A pang of intense pain could be felt from his ribs.

"Speaking of which, I'm still wounded..."

Kamito groaned painfully.

It happened last night--during the first night of the Blade Dance festival, he received these injuries when battling Leonora Lancaster, the ace of the Knights of the Dragon Emperor who represented Dracunia.

Even though it was a brief battle lasting only a couple of minutes, Kamito was still cornered to the verge of death by Leonora who had become a berserker through the awakening of Dragon Blood. Using her elemental waffe of the strongest class, the Dragon Slayer, she penetrated his chest deeply.

Kamito was able to make a comeback and defeat Leonora only thanks to the revived sword spirit Est. To this date, the Demon Slayer had already saved him from many desperate crises. Even though she had closed off her heart due to past tragedy, in the end, she still responded to Kamito's summons and returned to the battlefield.

"...Hmm?"

Suddenly, Kamito noticed a sense of dissonance.

Trying to get up from the simple bed, Kamito found his arm--

Being gripped tightly by a small and icy-cold hand.

"E-Est!?"

Kamito was shocked.

Before his eyes was a beautiful girl with silver-white hair, sleeping soundly with light breathing noises.

Her curled up body was wrapped in a blanket. Her sleeping form almost resembled a tiny angel.

However, the problem was--

"...!"

Her manner of attire, which was basically nude... That was the situation.

Other than the black kneesocks that covered her legs, her entire body was bare.

Lustrous silver-white hair. Skin as smooth and white as fresh milk.

From the gaps of the blanket, two mild protrusions were faintly visible.

Her adorable breath brushed against his arm, causing a strange ticklish feeling.

"What should I do now, given this..."

Kamito muttered in a quandary.

Est's hand was currently gripping Kamito's arm tightly . This prevented him from getting up directly.

Seeing her sleeping so soundly, it would be a pity to wake her up on purpose.

Besides... Gazing at Est's peaceful sleeping face, Kamito recalled.

The reason she was like this, was probably because she felt insecure.

Normally she would sleep in the form of a sword in order to reduce the consumption of power, but now she was maintaining the appearance of a young girl. This was the proof.

In order to save Kamito who was being devoured by the Brand of Darkness, Est had sacrificed herself and disappeared from this world. At the time, she recalled the past memories she had forgotten.

She recalled the life of her first contractor -- Sacred Queen Areishia Idriss. Her memories had been stolen by the curse.

Even though Est was currently incomplete, holding only one tenth of her original power, she still inherited the attributes of the demon sword which robbed its owner's life. If he continued to maintain his contract with Est, Kamito would soon meet the same fate as her past contractors.

Nevertheless, Kamito had made a promise with Est.

Whether your curse or your fate as a demon sword, I will accept all of it -- that was what he had said.

(I will win the Blade Dance together with Est --)

Watching Est's peaceful sleeping face, Kamito renewed his resolve.

The winner of the Blade Dance was to be bestowed a miracle by the Elemental Lords.

Through this miraculous power, capable of making any Wish come true, changing Est's fate as a demon sword was not impossible.

"Wish...?"

Kamito felt a pang of pain in his left hand, the one covered by the black leather glove.

Beneath the glove was the spirit seal from his past contracted spirit.

Three years ago, Kamito was known as the Strongest Blade Dancer. In order to realize *her* Wish, he had emerged as the victor of the Blade Dance.

(At the time -- What kind of wish did I make for her...)

Somehow, almost all of his memories of that day were gone.

What he could recall were merely scraps of images.

The figure of the darkness spirit devoured by a pitch-black Wish.

After that, three years had passed--

She appeared before Kamito once more.

As the subordinate of a different and mysterious Ren Ashbell.

"Kami... to..."

"Hmm?"

Feeling a squirming presence, Kamito looked down at Est.

Only to find her still sleeping with cute breathing noises.

...Apparently she called out Kamito's name from her dreams.

"I am your sword... Your wish is my command..."

Kiss~

"E-Est...!?"

His fingertips felt the soft sensation of her lips.

Just as Kamito frantically tried to withdraw--

"Mmm... Kamito... I... love..."

Kiss~ Kiss~

Est held on to Kamito's arm tightly.

"So..."

What should he do, just as Kamito agonized, at this moment--

Snap... Sounds of twigs breaking could be heard coming from outside the tent.

"...!?"

"...E-Excuse me, Kamito. W-What do you think y-you are d-do, d-doing?"

At the entrance to the tent, a girl was wielding Flametongue, her shoulders trembling.

Her long hair was tied into twintails on opposite sides of her head. Her eyes were like rubies infused with burning flames. Despite the slight paucity of her bosom, the proportions of her figure were as beautiful as a statue of a goddess.

Claire Rouge. Originally the high-born daughter hailing from the prestigious family of Duke Elstein.

A cute and beautiful girl who mesmerized people on sight.

However--

"How do you intend to e-ex, e-explain?"

In her current state, she was almost akin to a berserk flame spirit.

"Hey, hey... The tent is catching on fire!"

Kamito called out frantically--

"And I-I was so w-worried about you!"

Her twintails standing upright on end, Claire walked directly over.

"N-No, this is a misunderstanding!"

"...~tsk, what is this, isn't that your explanation every single time!?"

Tears were beginning to well up in those ruby-like eyes.

At this moment--

"Fuaah..."

Est finally woke up.

Yawning adorably, she rubbed her eyes with her hands.

...Apparently not completely awake.

"Mmm..."

Just as Claire stopped advancing, in that very instant.

Kiss~

" "What!?" "

Kamito and Claire screamed simultaneously.

Because Est kissed Kamito on his cheek.

"Y-You, y-you, what are you d-doing!?"

Claire shouted with her face all red.

"I am Kamito's contracted spirit. Offering a morning kiss to the contractor is a natural duty."

"L-Liar, I've never heard of anything like that!?"

Trembling, Claire's hair made noises as she shook... Indeed, it has never been heard of before.

"Not lying."

Kiss~

"...~tsk, Kamito, you must have taught weird ideas to Est again..."

"I have no idea! Besides, what do you mean by 'again'!?"

The tent's wooden support column began to emit black smoke.

...Not good. If this continued, the entire tent will turn into charcoal.

Kamito hastily racked his brains for a way to escape the crisis--

"B-By the way, I am being ordered around by you as your contracted spirit, right?"

"...? That's right, after all, you are my slave spirit."

Claire nodded matter-of-factly... Truly deplorable, but whatever.

"Well then, I will also offer a morning kiss to my master."

"...Uh?"

Claire was instantly frozen with shock.

In this situation, the term master -- referred to Claire, naturally.

"W-Wha, w-what is this! Some kind of joke?"

"It can't possibly be a joke."

"Ahhhh..."

As Kamito slid his finger lightly across her chin, Claire made a cute scream.

"I-If you dare do such a thing, don't expect me to forgiiii... Uwah!"

"Hey, just relax--"

As soon as he blew lightly in her ear, Claire suddenly lost all strength and collapsed.

Before she fell over, Kamito frantically caught and supported her back.

"S-Seriously, what are you doing...!"

Claire instantly blushed bright red and began to anger. But unbelievably, she made no effort to resist meaningfully.

Probably having bathed in river water, her smooth skin gave off the scent of soap.

"Your ears are your weak points, you know."

"Uwah, n-no...!"

Usually domineering in personality, Claire was unexpectedly meek when others took the initiative. Kamito knew that very well.

Even though she was the violent hell cat girl, her true nature was a pure and delicate young lady.

Kamito embraced Claire as she lay powerlessly in his arms.

"Well then, please accept this morning kiss... Master."

Whispering softly in her ear, he drew his lips lightly towards Claire's face--

"...~tsk!"

Puff!

Instantly, Claire's head began to emit steam.

"Waaaaah, Kamito you jerk!"

Her face all red, Claire noisily swayed her twintails as she ran away.

"...Seriously, she's still so cute."

Kamito shrugged and smiled wryly.

That said, perhaps he really went too far this time. Even though this method was very effective in dismissing her anger, it did create problems later.

...Perhaps he should prepare his grave while he still had time.

"--Kamito is the Demon King of the Night."

Est was expressionless -- However, her murmuring voice sounded subtly unhappy.

Caressing Est's head, Kamito said:

"Est, it's fine if you want to sleep a while longer. Have you recovered your power?"

"Yes, Kamito. In order to become your sword, I will focus on recovering my power."

Est nodded obediently and went back to sleep.

Covering her still naked body with a blanket, Kamito then changed his uniform.

Walking out of the tent, he took a deep breath of the refreshing early morning air.

--At this time, he noticed something had fallen before the tent.

It was a coil of unimpressive bandages. Also, there was a basket of fruit.

"...That girl, she even brought these things... Feels like I'm the bad guy now."

Scratching his face, he was just about to pick up the objects on the ground when--

"Fufu, Kamito-kun, you surely brought to life your beast-like self just now."

Rustle rustle... A girl appeared out from the thicket.

Gorgeous waist-length black hair. Light gray eyes, adorned by cute lashes.

Wearing a bold uniform that was styled like a low-cut dress, she was the Empire's former imperial princess.

"...Fianna!? You s-saw!?"

"--I will also offer a morning kiss to my master."

"Gaaaaaah!"

While maintaining a serious expression, the imperial princess imitated Kamito's voice.

Kamito instantly ducked, clutching his head in his arms.

"--Well then, please accept this morning kiss... Master."

"Aaaaaah... I-I beg you, please stop it... Please stop this."

"Fufu, Kamito-kun is so cute~"

Watching Kamito rolling around on the ground in embarrassment, Fianna smiled mischievously with a chuckle.

Part 2

"How amazing. While I was sleeping, you've built a stronghold already?"

"No, it's only half complete. We need an even sturdier stronghold this time. A fortress-class stronghold that not even Dracunia's Knights of the Dragon Emperor could breach."

Kamito and Fianna walked side by side in the quiet forest.

Although ordinary people could only see a forest here, anyone with sufficient elementalist potential would notice an invisible barrier spread out between the trees.

To have constructed this level of a barrier within the span of merely one night, she truly lived up to her name as the princess maiden who was the original candidate for Queen. During this time, other teams were probably constructing their own strongholds, but surely none of them could have surpassed Fianna's in strength.

Faced with such a solid stronghold, there probably would not be any teams making an assault like Leonora's group last night.

Land protected by multiple barriers was equivalent to a sturdy castle to elementalists. The protection from the earth spirits bolstered divine power, and through the leylines flowing underground, one could even obtain blessings such as the recovery of fatigue.

"Of course, mechanisms for intercepting intruders are also perfect~"

"Yeah. Even this number of spirits have been tamed completely."

Surveying the little spirits flying across the forest, Kamito nodded with great feeling.

"Fufu, I'm looking forward to seeing elementalists from other teams fall into the traps."

"...Isn't that statement a little abnormal for a prestigious imperial princess to make?"

As Fianna smiled malevolently, Kamito cast a gaze of surprise--

Suddenly something passed them beneath their feet.

"...!?"

It was too late by the time they noticed. Just as Kamito was thinking there was something rising from the ground, numerous vines of plants appeared from underground and suspended Fianna in midair.

"...Ah! What are you doing... Insolent ones!"

Restrained and tied up by the vines, the imperial princess was struggling in panic. However, the more she moved the tighter the vines wrapped themselves around her soft bosom and buttocks.

Apparently, there were still some earth spirits who had yet to submit to her command.

"Yah, ahhh, this tickles...!"

The skirt of her uniform was swept up, offering a tantalizing view of her pure white panties.

"Ah, K-Kamito-kun... Please d-don't look!"

Fianna frantically tried to hold down her skirt. However, suspended in midair, she could not move freely and her skirt was lifted higher and higher.

"...S-Sorry... Uwah!"

With great awkwardness, Kamito found a very cute butt suddenly thrust before his nose.

A pair of extremely soft-looking white panties dominated Kamito's view entirely.

Pulled upwards by the vines, the panties were being embedded deeply into her bottom.

"Ah, owww... It hurts... Oooh... S-Save me...!"

Tear drops appearing from her eyes, Fianna moaned painfully.

"H-Hold on! I'm going to cut the vines now!"

Kamito took out a short sword from the chest of his uniform and prepared to sever the vines--

In that instant, one of Fianna's legs was pulled vertically up this time.

The short skirt was entirely curled up, exposing the white panties clearly in view.

"...!?"

"N-No, I don't want to look like this in front of Kamito-kun--!"

Fianna struggled frantically in an unsightly manner.

"Fianna, c-calm down! If you move randomly, my hand will -- Ah!"

Intending to sever the vines, Kamito's hand slipped.

Shred!

With the sound of something tearing, a piece of white fabric fluttered to the ground.

"..."

"..."

Embroidered with a cute design, it was the fair imperial princess' panties.

"I-Iyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Part 3

"Seriously, Kamito-kun is such a pervert! The Demon King of the Daytime!"

"Like I said, I'm sorry..."

Faced with Fianna pouting angrily, Kamito apologized again and again.

"I-I really didn't mean to do that!"

"...Hmph -- How would I really know?"

The imperial princess cast a gaze of suspicion. Perhaps due to her unclothed nether region, she was unable to remain calm as she tightly held down the sides of her skirt, her legs moving awkwardly as she walked.

"I-If I knew it was going to be seen anyway, I should have worn more appropriate underwear..."

"The pair just now was very cute too... Ah, wait..."

"...~tsk, Kamito-kun!"

Thud thud thud thud.

Blushing intensely, Fianna hammered her fists against Kamito's back.

Even though she was always teasing boldly, her true nature was a pure and innocent princess.

"S-Seriously, that's why Kamito-kun is such a jerk who doesn't know anything!"

Suddenly making a turn, she began to walk away.

"Where are you going?"

"Off to teach those earth spirits a good lesson. So that the incident just now does not happen a second time!"

Fianna left the path in the woods and entered the depths of the thicket.

...Apparently, Kamito had really made the princess displeased.

"...Well, as long as she stays in the barrier, there shouldn't be any danger."

Kamito sighed and continued along the path.

Leaving the forest -- Kamito arrived at the place where he had engaged Leonora in blade dance last night.

This was originally part of the dense forest but the majority of the trees had fallen over from the violent winds while the ground was scarred with craters.

This was the trail of destruction remaining from Leonora's going berserk.

(...An opponent I have no wish of facing again, but undoubtedly she will advance to the finals.)

Kamito muttered with a sigh.

The Blade Dance festival this time was far more deadly than the last -- that was what his battle with Leonora impressed upon him.

(However, Ren Ashbell's team definitely surpasses the Knights of the Dragon Emperor by far...)

Not only the other Ren Ashbell who had invited Kamito to dance at the ball -- but also the Instructional School's monster, Muir Alenstarl. Demon Caster Sjora Kahn.

As well as--

(That black knight...)

That particular person. Even amongst the gathering of monsters in Team Inferno, that person's ominous aura stood out.

An elementalist's instincts sensed it -- some kind of heretical beyond-human existence.

"Are we able to win? Against those kinds of people--"

During the two months since he had joined the Academy through Greyworth's machinations, Kamito had already recovered the majority of his combat sense.

Not only did he retrieve the power that earned him the title of the Strongest Blade Dancer three years ago, his new contract was with Est who belonged to the strongest class of sword spirit.

(However, it's still not enough...)

Unrelated to swordsmanship or the resilience of the body, a more fundamental issue of power--

"...Hmm?"

Kamito suddenly stopped walking.

Dissimilar to the smell of branches burning, an intense aroma was reaching his nose.

(...This smells great.)

Rumble. His stomach began to growl as if awakened.

...Speaking of which, I haven't eaten anything since dinner last night.

Making his way towards the direction of the aroma, at a clearing on the riverside, he found the back view of a blonde high-class young lady.

Happily humming a song, she cooked soup in a pot.

Kamito tip-toed and approached--

"Rinslet, what are you doing?"

"Uwah, K-Kamito-san!"

Surprised from behind, Rinslet screamed cutely and turned around.

Bathed beneath the morning rays, her long and platinum blonde hair displayed dazzling luster.

Her beautiful emerald green eyes opened wide.

Dressed in an apron around her uniform, she was holding a bowl and a spoon in her hands.

To be frank, this get up did not suit her identity as a high-class young lady at all, but the contrast proved to be rather adorable.

"Seriously, don't scare me with a sudden greeting!"

Rinslet pouted, slightly miffed.

"...Sorry. I was attracted by the aroma. Are you making breakfast now?"

"Yes. But it's still at the stage of preparations--"

Kamito glanced behind Rinslet as she nodded. It was a simple makeshift kitchen.

A counter top had been built using chopped down logs. Stones had been piled up to make a stove. Fish caught from the river were being kept fresh using massive ice blocks created by her prided ice magic.

"...This looks quite legit. How did a noble lady like you learn to cook?"

Though Kamito himself was capable of simple cooking , Rinslet's skills had already reached the level of top chefs .

He wanted to find the secret to her progress.

"By preparing food for Carol every day, I naturally became skilled."

"Why are you cooking for the maid when you are the mistress?"

"It is a noble's responsibility to provide personally prepared delicious food to the ones who serve us. Noblesse oblige or something like that, that was what Carol taught me."

"...Uh, are you sure you weren't tricked by Carol."

Kamito stated in shock.

...Come to think of it, Rinslet was equipped with various skills one would not expect to find in a sheltered high-class lady. In a certain sense, this was all thanks to a certain useless maid.

"By the way, Kamito-san, are your injuries okay?"

"Yeah, how should I say this..."

Faced with Rinslet's worried inquiry, Kamito nodded as he tried turning the joints in his arms.

Last night, Kamito's chest had been pierced by Leonora's Dragon Slayer. Ending up with only a few broken ribs was truly fortunate. As for the broken bones, they had already been set and healed by Fianna during his sleep.

Fianna had mentioned before that Kamito possessed exceptional self-recovery abilities. This was most likely due to entering a contract with a sword spirit possessing steel attributes, resulting in a reinforced body.

"...That's wonderful."

"That said, I'm still quite exhausted."

Smiling wryly, he replied.

"Right. That's what I was thinking, so I am preparing a special soup with nourishing effects."

Rinslet smiled tenderly.

This charming smile made Kamito's heart begin to race --

"R-Really? It'd be wonderful to drink some soup in this cold weather."

Trying to hide his loss of composure, Kamito glanced at the soup in the pot.

"In my homeland, this sort of weather counts as warm actually."

"Naturally, how could this compare to Laurenfrost, the land of ice and snow..."

The soup was amber in color and made with chicken, wild vegetables and various spices.

"Looks really tasty..."

"...Sneaking a taste is not allowed."

Rinslet warned with a raised finger.

"...Not allowed?"

"Where is your pride as an elementalist? That sort of behavior is disgraceful... O-Or perhaps, Kamito-san, this is the kind of attitude you take to steal a taste of girls?"

"How did the conversation come to this!?"

Seeing Rinslet glancing at him with a frown, Kamito retorted back--

...Rumble. His stomach was growling.

"..."

"Seriously, you're hopeless... Just to be clear, this is a special exception, okay?"

"...Thanks."

Rinslet took a large spoon to serve the soup, delivering it before Kamito.

"...Umm, what?"

"Your arm is still injured, right? H-Hurry and open your mouth..."

Rinslet blushed and said.

...Clearly, she intended to feed him with a "Say ah~ and open up" kind of scene.

"No, this level of injury..."

"You don't need me?"

Rinslet made a hurt expression.

Kamito frantically shook his head--

"Ah, no... Please feed me!"

His heart rate rising, he drank the soup in one gulp.

The chicken and the vegetables were well-stewed and melted in his mouth. The fragrant taste spread all over his tongue.

(Ah, this soup...)

Suddenly, Kamito recalled what happened on the first day when he entered Areishia Spirit Academy.

At the time, Rinslet had brought warm soup to Kamito when he was hungry and staying in that crude little hut that was no different from a stable.

(Definitely, at the time, she said it was because Carol had cooked too much...)

Thinking back now, since that useless maid could not possibly have cooked, Rinslet must have made up the excuse to hide her embarrassment.

Due to Rinslet's usual unapproachable airs, Kamito originally mistook her for an arrogant high-class lady. Her true nature was actually a kind-hearted and benevolent girl.

"...Rinslet, you're such a wonderful person."

Kamito could not stop himself from blurting out.

"W-What are you saying, so suddenly!"

"Ah, no..."

"I-I am not some kind of wonderful person. Clearly I am a villain."

Sent into a panic, Rinslet began talking incomprehensibly.

Her lack of forthrightness also felt rather adorable.

"By the way, where's Ellis?"

"The Captain? She's performing a dedicatory blade dance beside the river."

"...I see. Well then, let me go greet her briefly."

Wrapping things up here, Kamito decided to stop hindering Rinslet while she cooked.

Waving to Rinslet, Kamito made his way towards the riverbank.

Part 4

Walking along the riverbank, Kamito found a towering cliff.

This was where Claire and the others had battled the Knights of the Dragon Emperor. The cliff was still littered with the destruction caused by the fight against the dragon spirit.

"...To think an outdoor bath that could not have been easy to construct, would be virtually destroyed."

Muttering, he walked towards the edge of the cliff at the same time--

"Hah! Fu--!"

Accompanied by vigorous shouts, the sound of slicing wind could be heard.

Peering out from the side of the cliff, he found a girl swinging a sword, her hair in a ponytail.

Her body was clad in light armor. Her dark-brown eyes were stern.

This was the Captain of the Sylphid Knights -- Ellis Fahrengart.

"Yah, hah--!"

She swung her sword with forceful motions, producing sounds of sharp slicing wind.

Rather than sword training, this was a ritual blade dance performed as an offering to spirits inhabiting the river.

Her graceful and spectacular blade dance caused Kamito to watch in awe.

The profile of her stern face seemed especially beautiful.

Soon after, Ellis re-sheathed her sword by her waist and took a deep bow towards the river.

From the water surface appeared faint light as water spirits gathered to dance.

Apparently the spirits were pleased with Ellis' blade dance.

As Ellis wiped her sweat in relief, Kamito greeted her.

"Hi, Ellis."

"K-Kamito... You saw it!?"

Ellis turned around, her dark-brown eyes opening wide.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to peep..."

Kamito scratched his head and walked towards Ellis.

"Ellis, your blade dance was really beautiful."

"...!? I-I... Beautiful!?"

"No, I'm talking about your blade dance, Ellis... But anyway, you're quite beautiful too."

Ellis instantly blushed.

"Y-You, what insolence! Prepare to die, I'll make you into onion gratin!"

Swiftly drawing her sword, she stabbed the point of the blade towards Kamito's neck.

"What the heck, getting angry so suddenly!"

"C-Calling me beautiful, surely that cannot be what you seriously think...!"

"No, I simply blurted out what's on my mind..."

"Oooh..."

Blushing more intensely, the Captain stuttered as if she was at a loss.

"Y-You, why did you come here?! ...Could it be, to peep!?"

"Idiot, why would anyone do that!?"

Kamito frantically denied--

"Hmph, that I know... After all, there is nothing worth seeing even if I were taking a bath in the water!"

Ellis suddenly turned her gaze away as if she was sulking.

As a normal healthy male, of course the thought had crossed his mind before... But if he were to say this out loud, she would surely slice him in earnest, so it would be best to keep quiet for now.

"I was just about to start the morning purification rite and training. What perfect timing for you to be here, Ellis , would you like to perform morning practice with me? We haven't trained together for quite a while."

"Hmm... Morning practice? Sure."

Sheathing her sword, Ellis coughed lightly.

Back at the Academy, Kamito would occasionally spar with Ellis for morning practice. Although she also had Sylphid Knights meetings early in the morning, it was a

perfect way to release the tension in her body before class .

"But are your injuries okay?"

"Yeah, so I'd like to get some exercise... But please have mercy."

"Acknowledged."

The two distanced themselves and drew their swords.

Ellis used a long sword while Kamito used the short sword he kept for defense. Though they were both using weapons that were different from their actual elemental waffen, this was fine for the purposes of physical training .

Readying her sword stance, Ellis watched Kamito silently.

"Come, Ellis--"

Just as Kamito spoke, in that instant--

"Hah--!"

With a vigorous shout, Ellis charged.

Despite treading over uneven riverside terrain, she still made a series of aggressive slashes. The name of the Sylphid Knights' Captain truly was not just for show.

Kamito blocked the sharp sword with his short sword. The blades clashed violently many times.

Sparks flew. High pitched metallic noises resounded.

This was a spectacular blade dance performed with perfect synchronicity.

However, a displeased expression appeared on Ellis' face--

"Kamito, stop trying to accommodate me. If you are just playing around, I will not be pleased."

"You have a point... But Ellis, different from my swordsmanship that was trained at the Instructional School, yours is the orthodox style of the knightly sword, right? If you try to accommodate me, you might pick up bad habits."

"No matter. My sword style is too rigid. After last night's blade dance, that was what I realized greatly. Hence, I hope you can teach me your sword skills. In order to obtain victory in this Blade Dance festival!"

"...!"

Ellis swung her sword in a heavy downward strike. Kamito blocked as his eyes widened in surprise.

This was an attack which manifested the power of Ellis ' resolve to get stronger.

"...If that's the case, I understand."

Her well-practiced sword style was indeed rather easy to predict.

It was probably okay to teach her some of those so-called unorthodox sword skills.

Kicking the ground to leap backwards for some distance, Kamito switched his short sword to a reverse grip. Ellis held her sword horizontally and made a courageous charge -- this was based on her highly accomplished spear skills.

In that instant, Kamito suddenly lowered his stance and made a light sweeping kick.

"Ah!"

Ellis' eyes widened in surprise. Though she did not fall over, Kamito took advantage of her momentary loss of balance to grab her arm and shove her back against the ground.

Then swiftly he immobilized her legs. Though Ellis struggled desperately, it was impossible for her to escape due to the restraining of her joints.

"Guh... H-How underhanded, Kamito!"

"Even if the enemy is wielding a sword, it doesn't mean they will always fight with a sword. I suppose it's fine if you're facing a noble-minded knight, but there exist elementalists who fight this way."

"Y-You may have a point..."

Ellis grumbled with a reluctant expression--

Then suddenly her face went red.

"Uh?"

"K-Kamito, this posture..."

"...!?"

Only when pointed out did he notice.

The fact that he was pushing a girl down against the ground, their legs intertwined together.

Plus the fact of Ellis' slightly lifted skirt, clearly exposing her black panties.

"S-Sorry...!"

Kamito frantically tried to stand up, but--

"W-Wait!"

Ellis gripped his wrist tightly.

"L-Let this continue a little while longer, I do not mind. .."

"...Uh?"

Maintaining this posture of pushing Ellis down on the ground, Kamito widened his eyes at the sight.

The uniform drenched with sweat. The heaving bosom that quivered with every breath she took.

Diverting the gaze of her slightly moistened dark-brown eyes, Ellis expelled warm breath as she spoke:

"Y-You have to take responsibility..."

Ellis pouted her lips as if sulking.

"Responsibility?"

"The one who changed me from a knight, i-into a woman, is you..."

"Wha, what d-do you mean by that!?"

Just as Kamito stared dumbfounded--

"Incinerate until nothing remains, O scorching conflagration -- Fireball!"

An incantation of spirit magic could be heard -- then immediately, the nearby ground exploded.

Sent flying by the shock of the explosion, Kamito fell into the river.

"W-What the heck!? ...Holy, this is really scalding!"

The river water was boiling as bubbles rose up.

"...Hey, Kamito? Just now, what was happening there?
"

Turning his gaze, he found Claire wielding Flametongue, approaching slowly from the shallows.

"All I could see was the sight of you pushing Ellis down on the ground, eh?"

...She was smiling. So terrifying.

Feeling his life was endangered, Kamito frantically tried to escape--

The crisp sound of water changing state could be heard.

"What!?"

Suddenly, he found a massive wall of ice erected before him.

This was Rinslet's specialty, the spirit magic of Ice Wall --

"Oh my, Kamito-san, where do you think you're going ?"

Appearing in the opposite direction from Claire was Rinslet.

Smiling calmly, she wielded her elemental waffe, the magic bow.

"R-Rinslet...!"

"Enemies of womankind must be frozen in cold storage -- this is one of the Laurenfrost family's precepts."

"...!?"

Losing his escape route, Kamito rapidly changed directions and ran towards the forest on the opposite shore.

"Hey, stay right there!"

Hearing the sound of freezing arrows fired from behind, Kamito found them whizzing past his back.

At the last second, Kamito jumped into the thicket in the forest--

In that instant, he found his legs entangled by the vines of numerous plants, making him fall flat on his face .

"...These are dryads!?"

"Fufu, Kamito-kun, the spirits earlier have now been trained properly~"

Appearing from the depths of the forest was the great imperial princess smiling impishly.

"Fianna...!"

"Just to deter you from acting naughty towards other girls, Kamito-kun, you need to be taught a lesson too."

While Kamito was immobilized, Claire and Rinslet also gathered around.

"Ha, haha..."

Kamito laughed convulsively.

Part 5

The sound of numerous footsteps and the intense clashing of swords could be heard from the forest.

Running through the gaps between the trees were girls wielding all sorts of elemental waffen -- dressed uniformly in knightly attire colored red against a white background, this was the uniform of the Rupture Division, the team representing the Principality of Rossvale.

Moving with well-trained coordination, the five girls were chasing after prey.

"--Esil and Yustra, take a detour to the right. Swiftly flank the target, encircle and exterminate."

The one leading the party was a girl with dark-brown hair and a child-like face.

Milla Bassett -- the leader of the Rupture Division, and the youngest elementalist taking part in this year's event.

Bearing an azure right eye and an amber-colored left eye.

The girl's heterochromic eyes coldly focused on the prey.

The target of their hunt was a beautiful black-haired girl dressed in a dark-colored dress.

Team Inferno's darkness spirit.

"Let all shadows be incinerated to ashes -- Evil Flame!"

The girl fluttered her dress as if she were dancing, chanting high level magic carrying the darkness attribute .

Pitch black flames of conflagration were emitted from her finger tips, assaulting the girls in pursuit--

All it took was one lick of these tongues of magical flames for the trees in the forest to vanish instantly.

However, Milla Bassett swung her sword using spirit magic, defeating the black flames.

"How foolish. Our spirits possess resistance against the attribute of darkness."

"Right. How annoying it is to face you people who employ spirits with the holy attribute."

The darkness spirit girl landed lightly on the ground.

"--Hence, you shall be defeated here."

"...!?"

In that instant, the girls in pursuit all halted.

Beneath their feet on the ground, a glowing magic circle appeared.

"--This is an Isolation Barrier!?"

The girls of the Rupture Division instantly fell to their knees like puppets whose strings have been severed.

This was a barrier for cutting off access to leylines, thereby severely weakening the divine power of elementalists.

This was no ordinary defensive barrier -- rather, it was a trap set by a top princess maiden, specifically for killing elementalists.

"How could this happen, did you plan on luring us here from the start?"

Milla Bassett looked up in shock.

The darkness spirit girl chuckled and smiled adorably.

"Rejoice -- for you have become live sacrifices for Nepenthes Lore."

An ominous roar could be heard rumbling in the depths of the forest.

This was neither a beast's howl nor a human's yell.

Simply hearing the sound was enough to feel a horrific chill along the spine as if frozen -- It was that repulsive and otherworldly of a sound.

Then--

Suddenly, numerous black chains extended from afar to entangle the limbs of the girls collapsed on the ground .

Before they even had the chance to scream, the girls instantly lost consciousness.

"...What are you doing?"

Milla Bassett gazed at the darkness spirit girl.

Only Milla had been able to detect the ominous presence and evaded the chains with the slimmest of margins.

"Oh my, you do have a most interesting *eye*."

"...!?"

Milla reflexively covered her left eye with her hair.

By her feet were her teammates who had collapsed to the ground unconscious.

In this despairing situation, she must rack her brains to seek survival.

With only one member remaining, chances of victory were unlikely in a confrontation against a high level darkness spirit. Should she unleash the power of her *eye* -- No, with the Rupture Division currently in disarray, unleashing it was not possible.

...Rumble...!

The earth shook -- from the depths of the forest, that particular ominous presence was approaching.

The darkness spirit's contractor -- Nepenthes Lore.

"I -- the Rupture Division, shall not fall here."

Without time to hesitate, Milla decided to retreat.

Manifesting her sword of spirit magic, she swiftly sliced apart the magic circle of the Isolation Barrier.

"--You won't be able to escape."

The darkness spirit girl smiled lightly and released black flames--

However, Milla effortlessly dodged the incoming flames and disappeared into the depths of the forest.

Part 6

"A mere rabbit, letting her escape isn't really a problem , but--"

The darkness spirit girl, Restia, narrowed her dusk-colored eyes slightly, murmuring to herself.

"--That *eye*, truly cannot be left alone."

To Restia personally, the annihilation of the Rupture Division was simply incidental.

Her original purpose was to provide divine power to the elementalist, Nepenthes Lore, for recovering energy.

However, their division leader, the girl's *eye* was a separate matter. Left to roam free, it could prove to be a hindrance during an inopportune time.

"For the sake of the plan, there is a need to clear all obstacles -- Have you eaten your fill?"

As if responding to the girl's question--

The black chains, formed from magic, slid smoothly and withdrew from the girls' bodies.

At some point in time, a black knight, clad in ominous armor, had started standing behind Restia.

The armor of darkness creaked noisily, as if about to burst from the expanding interior--

Absorbing divine power from the elementalists, assimilating their energy.

"--You won't have to wait long, Kamito."

Smiling, Restia casually retrieving the Rupture Division's magic stones.

The Instructional School's assassin Jio Inzagi, the Academy's strongest elementalist Velsaria Eva Fahrengart, Monster Muir Alenstarl, as well as the

Dragon Knight Leonora Lancaster... Within a mere month, Kamito had already fought several formidable foes.

The experiences of these battles should probably awaken the dormant existence hidden in his body.

"Kamito, this is my reward for you. Let me prepare your final enemy--"

Nepenthes Lore -- the manifestation of the Demon King's will.

Born through forbidden secret arts, a monster of darkness.

--Yet another illegitimate child left behind by the Demon King.

Chapter 2 - Emissary from the Principality of Rossvale

Part 1

Shining upon Ragna Ys, the sun had risen high --

Kamito and his group were having breakfast by the riverside.

"Seriously, you should have told us sooner that you were just doing sword training."

"T-That is so true! I thought, surely..."

"I almost thought Kamito-kun was going to violate poor Ellis!"

"As if! What kind of person do you take me for..."

Half narrowing his eyes, Kamito glared at the three high-class ladies blushing to their ears before him.

"Umm, I-I was actually prepared already..."

Awkwardly fiddling her fingers, Ellis murmured softly on the side.

"Did you say something, Ellis?"

"N-Nothing!"

Kamito frowned. Ellis' face instantly went bright red.

"...Never mind. Anyway, let's eat before the food gets cold."

"Agreed, Kamito."

Sitting beside Kamito, Est nodded impatiently.

Tree trunks were split to make a table, hot dishes were set out for breakfast.

Perfectly toasted bread. Fish from the river, roasted on a spit and flavored with salt. Wild herb salad, mushroom stir-fried with butter. Then there was the Laurenfrost family's special chicken soup recipe which made effective use of ginger and spices -- without exception, every dish looked extremely tasty.

"So, bon appetit. These are my confident creations."

Rinslet proudly puffed out her chest.

"...But really, this is so sumptuous. Where did you get all the ingredients from?"

These dishes were not possible to make using only the canned food they brought.

"Scarlet and I gathered them while Kamito was sleeping."

"This sanctuary's forest is really a treasure trove of ingredients."

"Kind of similar to the Academy's Spirit Forest, I guess ... By the way, this place feels like some kind of otherworld."

Other than the fact that it was inhabited by many spirits, the ecology felt no different from that of the mainland.

"Kamito-kun, that is because this Ragna Ys is the sanctuary ruled directly by the Elemental Lords. After all , given the vast number of princess maidens in their service, wouldn't it be a problem if they were unable to survive here?"

The former princess maiden at the Divine Ritual Institute, Fianna, explained to him.

...I see. It seemed like this was quite a special place, even within the world of Astral Zero.

"I'm going to hunt a giant boar for lunch."

Rinslet suggested as she made a bow-drawing gesture.

Normally, hunting was prohibited in this Sanctuary, being the territory of the Elemental Lords. Only during the Blade Dance was the restriction lifted.

"I will take part as well. Though cooking is not my forte, hunting is my specialty."

"B-But I do not like hunting. The thought of killing those adorable and furry animals..."

Ellis frowned and picked up Scarlet who was busy eating a fish, hugging the cat against her chest.

"Meow!? Meow meow--"

Bewildered, Scarlet began to struggle noisily.

"Ellis, give it up. Scarlet doesn't like it when you do that."

"Mmm... N-nothing of that sort! Look, Scarlet and I are really close!"

"Meow--Meow--!"

Watching these two with a wry expression, Kamito drank the special soup.

The ginger's flavor, having thoroughly entered the soup, took instant effect. He could feel his body warm up from the very core.

"Rinslet's cooking is really delicious."

Sitting next to him, Est offered praise expressionlessly.

"Fufu, Est-san, you have to eat more if you want to grow up faster."

"No, Est is a spirit so she's not going to grow up..."

As Rinslet caressed Est's head gently, Kamito ridiculed her comment.

"Well I must admit, your cooking skills are commendable. When I restore the Elstein family to greatness once more, I might consider having you as a maid."

"...Eh? R-Really?"

Just as Rinslet started to show joy--

"...Hey wait a minute, why do I have to be your maid in the first place!?"

"A maid uniform might suit you unexpectedly well, you know?"

"W-What are you talking about!? Obviously it suits you way more than me!"

Rinslet retorted furiously.

(...By the way, isn't she getting furious in a rather atypical manner?)

Kamito tilted his head in puzzlement as he watched the two childhood friends quarrel.

Part 2

After breakfast, the group held a meeting to decide on their strategy henceforth.

Kamito gazed at the map on the table as he drank tea brewed by Rinslet.

Using earth spirits to scout the surroundings, the gathered information was then used to draw this map. Claire apparently had some artistic talent, for the resulting map was quite simple and easy to understand.

That said, other than the vicinity of their stronghold enclosed by the barrier, virtually everywhere else was blank.

For example, they still had no idea about the size of the entire grounds.

"So, let's organize and sum up the information we have on hand."

Setting down her teacup lightly, Claire began to describe the current situation.

The Blade Dance festival's main battle event -- the Tempest had a total of twenty-four teams participating. Based on the reports of the wind spirits sent out to scout, teams were already being eliminated on the first day.

On the other hand, the Quina Empire's Four Gods, the Holy Kingdom of Lugia's Sacred Spirit Knights, and various other strong teams had already established secure strongholds.

Due to failing their nocturnal assault on the first night, Dracunia's Knights of the Dragon Emperor, one of the major candidate teams for victory, was currently slightly behind. But given their level of power, it did not really count as any major setback.

"What I want to know most is information about Team Inferno, but sadly we don't even know where their stronghold is located."

"Looks like their team harbors an elementalist skilled in espionage techniques. All the wind spirits we sent out to scout were struck down."

Ellis reported softly with regret.

"An elementalist skilled in espionage techniques, eh..."

Suddenly, Kamito recalled the girl with jade-colored hair he saw at the opening ceremony.

Her face had been hidden by a hooded garment, but those pointy ears were definitely the telltale signs of the Elfim race. Born with exceptional skills in presence concealment, many of the Elfim who became elementalists took on espionage duties.

"However, we did obtain noteworthy information related to Team Inferno."

"...?"

Ellis' words made everyone pay attention.

"Remember that ominous looking black knight who appeared at the opening ceremony?"

"Who could possibly forget..."

Claire displayed a submissive expression. All the other girls nodded one after another.

Evidently, Kamito was not the only who sensed an ominous aura from the black knight.

"What about the black knight?"

"Yes. From the looks of it, the black knight has separated from Team Inferno and is currently acting alone. Earlier, it was mentioned that there were teams being eliminated on the first day, right--"

"Could it be possible that...!"

"Yes. It is exactly that possibility. The team representing the Walz Kingdom -- those girls were apparently wiped out by the black knight singlehandedly ."

"A single person wiping out an entire Blade Dance team, huh..."

Kamito muttered gravely... Whoever really accomplished that, was truly a monster beyond doubt.

"What is the contracted spirit serving the black knight like? If we know what attribute the spirit possesses, perhaps we could come up with a counter strategy?"

"Ah yes, that is..."

Faced with Claire's inquiry, Ellis stuttered--

"A darkness spirit in the form of a human girl -- Apparently."

"...!?"

Everyone gasped. Kamito's eyes widened in surprise.

"...Restia!?"

He could not help but call out her name.

"That darkness spirit girl, is indeed--"

"Kamito-kun's former contracted spirit... Isn't that right ?"

Claire and Fianna whispered softly with worry.

Ellis and Rinslet exchanged glances awkwardly. Although these two never met Restia directly, after the mission at the mining city, they had learned about Kamito's past to a certain extent and knew that Restia was an extremely important existence to him.

Kamito's gaze fell upon the leather glove covering his left hand.

(Restia... What exactly are you planning?)

After arriving at this Ragna Ys, she had contacted Kamito twice.

The first was in the garden of the castle. The second was last night, prior to Leonora's attack.

But what exactly were her intentions...?

Kamito's expression was grave--

"Well... A-Anyway!"

Slowly, Claire began to speak.

"Even though we're very concerned about the movements of the black knight and the darkness spirit, we have no way of taking precautions given our lack of information. After all, we can't simply sit here and tighten defenses at our stronghold."

"Right. If we focus too much on defense and fail to take action, that would be getting our priorities wrong."

Ellis nodded.

She was right. The magic stones needed for advancing towards the finals were limited in number. If they did not take the initiative to attack, they would definitely lose the competition.

Currently, the only magic stones acquired by Team Scarlet were the two they took from the Kingdom of Balstan's team. Even if all the members of Team Scarlet survived these seven days, lacking sufficient magic stones would prevent them from advancing to the finals.

Gathering a certain number of magic stones in the opening stage, then rely on the stronghold's defense and wait for the other teams to weaken one another before venturing out to rob them of their magic stones -- this strategy only sounded good in theory. As for attacking an elementalist defending behind a sturdy stronghold, that would be as poor a strategy as trying to besiege a castle with inadequate troops.

"Without any exceptions, none of the teams should be attacking on their own before their stronghold is established--"

Just as Claire explained quietly...

"...!? Something has entered the barrier!"

Fianna cried out. Instantly, tension appeared on everyone's face.

"Look over there--!"

Claire pointed at the sky.

A winged rabbit could be seen flying above the forest.

It was no ordinary creature. Clearly it was a spirit.

"An enemy team's scouting spirit?"

"Hmph, watch as I shoot it down!"

Rinslet chanted spirit language for releasing her elemental waffe, the magic bow--

"Wait a minute, don't attack!"

Clong!

Claire whacked Rinslet hard on the head with a soup spoon.

"Ouch! T-That really hurts... What the heck are you doing!?"

Holding her head, Rinslet tearfully yelled.

"You didn't even think for a moment before you decided to shoot it down."

Claire shrugged in amazement--

"...Look carefully. That is an emissary."

"Emissary?"

Rinslet frowned as Kamito and the rest focused their gaze on the spirit.

Circling widely above them, the spirit dropped something that it was holding in its mouth.

Fluttering down, a letter landed on the table.

Carefully examining the letter to ensure it was not a trap, Claire then opened the envelope to read its contents .

"What is it about?"

"A proposal for an alliance."

"Alliance?"

Everyone looked at one another.

Part 3

The letter was sent from the Principality of Rossvale's Rupture Division.

The bottom of the message had the division leader's signature with the Principality's seal.

"The seal looks real. I don't think this is forged."

Familiar with official correspondence, Fianna examined the letter and lightly set it back onto the table.

"The Principality of Rossvale..."

Kamito muttered with an admiring expression.

The Principality of Rossvale was a small, newly risen state where radicals had succeeded in gaining independence from the Holy Kingdom of Lugia.

As an independent state, their history was rather short and this was merely their second appearance at the Blade Dance festival. Nevertheless, served by high ranking holy spirits, they were regarded as the dark horse contender in the current competition.

"Stirring the most sensation of all is their ace, Milla Bassett."

"...If I remember correctly, participating at the young age of thirteen, she must be the youngest elementalist in this festival?"

Kamito's question was met with Claire's pouting face.

"Why are you so keen on memorizing her facts? You great big pervert."

"Stop making misleading accusations, Claire. You're the one who made me remember."

"Kamito-san, making excuses is not very classy behavior."

"...Seriously, we cannot be careless with you for even a second!"

"As befits your title as the Demon King of the Night, your target age range is truly wide."

"W-What is with you girls..."

"Kamito likes really young girls?"

"E-Est, why are you joining in this nonsense!?"

As the young ladies glared at him, Kamito's face twitched with discomfort.

"A-Anyway, who knew there'd be a team proposing to ally so early?"

Kamito coughed and changed the subject.

"Yes... Indeed it's very strange."

Claire nodded.

The rules of the Tempest did not prohibit teams from forming alliances.

However, this was normally a last resort taken only by teams that were on the verge of elimination. Alliances were not something simple to be trifled with. Considering that even if teams fought in cooperation, ultimately, only the top four teams advanced, this was completely natural.

In actual fact, there were virtually no cases of teams allying together in the opening stage of the Tempest in past Blade Dance festivals.

"The possibility of a trap seems quite high..."

"That's right. An ambush definitely awaits us at the negotiation site."

Rinslet agreed with Fianna's suggestion.

"However, if they really plan on deceiving us, this trap is a little too obvious. Perhaps something happened that we're not aware of."

Kamito knew that Claire's intuition was often quite accurate in times like these.

Besides inheriting the blood of the Elstein family which gave rise to numerous Queens over the generations, perhaps Claire was also blessed with sharp instincts since birth.

"If this is not a trap, perhaps we could give it a try. Let alone fighting on a united front, simply sharing information is already quite advantageous."

As expected of the knight hailing from a family of military tradition, Ellis' mindset was immensely practical .

"Furthermore, the Rupture Division's elementalists are all reputed to be masters of strong holy spirits. If we manage to forge an alliance, they should prove to be a reliable ally against the darkness spirit mentioned earlier. "

Kamito could not help but cast a glance at his left hand .

Three years ago, Kamito had been caught in a difficult fight against a holy spirit. Indeed, forming an alliance

with a team that consisted only of holy elementalists would definitely be the most effective way to oppose Restia's machinations.

"What do you think, Kamito?"

Following Claire's question, all eyes were on Kamito.

"Indeed, the probability of a trap is quite high. However, there is value to be gained in responding to the offer. In any case, our plans are not set in stone -- whether it's a trap or not, let's just wing it and act according to the situation."

"If Kamito-san thinks so, I will not object."

Rinslet spoke up. Ellis and Fianna also nodded in agreement.

"So it's decided, we will negotiate an alliance with the Rupture Division."

Claire nodded and pressed her hand against the Principality's seal at the end of the letter.

Chanting a spirit language incantation, immediately -- the seal began to burn, turning into a tiny flame spirit.

This was the guide spirit that was released from the seal.

Belonging to the lowest class of spirit, it was only able to perform simple tasks such as leading the way. But due their convenience as ease of use, these spirits were widely used for communications between elementalists.

"The negotiation site is two hours away on foot."

"How many people are we supposed to send?"

"...Not stated explicitly. But we can't have all five of us go."

"That's true..."

If other teams breached their stronghold while their defense was weakened, the tradeoff would not be worth it.

Furthermore, making their way as an entire team through the forest would be too conspicuous and would unnecessarily provoke the other party's wariness.

"Ordinarily, two people should be the most appropriate."

"Then Est and I will be enough--"

Kamito placed his hand on Est's head and patted her.

"Yes, Kamito. I will protect Kamito."

"Wait a minute, why are you acting like you have to be the one to go?!"

"That's right, Kamito-kun's injuries are not entirely healed yet!"

Claire and Fianna snarled furiously.

"I can't really let girls venture into danger while I stay back in a safe zone, right?"

"G-Girls..."

Claire blushed slightly--

"N-No way! You are definitely not permitted to go alone!"

But immediately, she began to shake her head again.

"We know you are very strong, Kamito, but do try to trust us a bit more."

"Reflect carefully on this, okay?!"

Scolded by the troupe of young ladies, Kamito backed down.

"...G-Got it. My bad."

...Indeed, perhaps it really was time to reflect.

(After all, I'm still stuck in the mindset of fighting alone.)

Unlike three years ago, Kamito now had comrades who could fight alongside with him.

"Besides, the other party will be wary if only you, a male, goes. Your notorious infamy is widespread even in foreign lands."

"Well, that makes sense... Wait a minute, what the heck do you mean by notorious infamy!?"

"You really want to know?"

"...Uh no, I think I have some idea already."

Kamito groaned from the depths of his throat.

"F-Furthermore, if it's you, who knows if you'll hook up with some girl from the Rupture Division... Let me remind you, making a move on a thirteen-year-old child is illegal, okay?"

"...How did it get to this!?"

"Yes." "Completely agreed." "I can picture it so clearly."

The other three agreed wholeheartedly with Claire.

"...Hey, what kind of person do you girls really think I am?"

"You really want to know?"

"Guh..."

"Kamito is the Demon King of the Night."

"E-Even you, Est..."

Kamito's face began to convulse.

...Clearly there was a need to dispel misunderstandings and recover true trust.

"--Anyway, Kamito's strength is indisputable. Considering the possibility of a trap, yes, it would be reassuring to have him as an accompanying bodyguard."

Claire coughed.

"...H-Hence, Kamito will accompany me as I take charge of negotiations!"

"Wait a minute, how was this decided?"

Ellis questioned sharply.

"No fair, you're stealing a march on us!"

"What do you mean, stealing a march!?"

Claire retorted, her face red.

"I have no choice but to stay behind..."

Fianna bit her finger as she spoke regrettably.

"...After all, only Fianna is able to build the stronghold."

Kamito expressed understanding as he scratched his head at the situation.

Considering her origins as the former imperial princess, Fianna would be the most suited for handling negotiations, however -- even ignoring the issue of the stronghold, he did not feel comfortable taking her along seeing as she had never received field training at the Academy. Besides, given this was a possible trap and the fact that they could be attacked en route, fighting while protecting her would be very difficult.

"W-Well then, take me along. After all, I always team up with Kamito within the Knights."

Ellis coughed softly and tightly embraced Kamito's arm.

Boing, Ellis' bosom also boldly pressed against him, causing Kamito to blush to his ears.

"Wait, Kamito is my slave spirit! I reserve all rights!"

This time, it was Claire who embraced Kamito's other arm. Though hers were smaller, Kamito could still feel that comfortably soft sensation, making his heart race subtly.

"Claire's possessions are equivalently mine!"

"What twisted logic!"

Sparks flew as the three young ladies engaged in dispute.

"That's not right, I shouldn't belong to anyone?"

Kamito's protest was duly ignored--

"In that case, let us decide by blade dance who gets to go with Kamito--"

Ellis released Kamito's arm and released her elemental waffe Ray Hawk in her hands.

"Hmph, that's fine with me!"

"Just as I hoped -- Hasten forth, keeper of the burning furnace!"

Rinslet held her Magic Bow of Ice while Claire summoned the fiery hell cat.

"S-Stop it, are you trying to destroy our constructed stronghold!?"

Kamito frantically yelled.

(...Seriously, why are these young ladies always so eager to fight?)

"...Ah-- Could you girls listen to a little opinion of mine?"

Kamito raised his hand.

"What?"

"...I think it's best that I go with Claire."

"There. The one to go will be me... Huh?"

Claire opened her mouth in amazement.

"...W-What!?"

"What is going on!?"

"No, well..."

Ellis and Rinslet interrogated.

Kamito took a step back, greatly troubled--

"Stop it you two. Kamito is having a hard time, right?"

Claire stepped forward as if shielding Kamito.

"Hear that? Kamito and I will be fine. Well well, Kamito is worried if he goes alone, so if you're really desperate for it, i-it's not like I can't agree to your request. "

Fufu, Claire displayed a composed and effortless expression as her twintails jumped.

"...K-Kamito, what on earth is going on!?"

"So unfair, what's wrong with choosing us?"

Sulking with a pout, Ellis and Rinslet objected tearfully .

"No, umm, considering comprehensively, I think Claire is the best candidate--"

Kamito scratched his head as he began to explain.

Claire, whose overall results in school were already excellent, was most accomplished in espionage skills. And this was precisely what was needed the most for the current mission.

On one hand, Ellis, the embodiment of chivalry, was the least suited to secretive acts of espionage. In fact, despite her excellent scores in practical techniques, she was only Rank C in the area of spying.

Similarly, Rinslet, who specialized in long range projectiles, was not suited for the current mission. Only deploying her in defense of the stronghold would make the best use of her skills.

That was what Kamito explained to them--

"Hmm, now that you put it that way..."

"You do have a point..."

Although they were still displeased, the two girls understood at least.

"W-What... It was for these kinds of reasons..."

For some reason, Claire began to sulk and pout.

(Well, there happens to be one more reason...)

Most importantly -- there was the suitability as a negotiator.

Although Rinslet's true nature was still a kind-hearted soul, that haughty attitude she displayed to everyone, perhaps out of habit, would only cause negotiations to fail.

As for Ellis who always insisted on upfront righteousness, she too, was unsuited for negotiations. Though that could be considered her virtue, however -- to the other party, such honesty would simply be a gift. To Ellis' own side, it would lead to an unfavorable result, and was a risk that could not be ignored.

Compared to these two, Claire had no obvious flaws as a negotiator.

Although she always acted domineering towards Kamito, she was able to act like a young lady from a prestigious family as long as she wanted to. Perhaps due to the ostracizing and bullying she received as the

younger sister of the Calamity Queen, she possessed quick wits as well as unwavering tenacity in spirit. Clearly such traits were well suited for negotiations.

"So it's decided -- I'll be relying on you, Claire."

"...Well, w-whatever. You deserve to be commended for your excellent judgment in choosing me."

Claire's face was bright red and she averted eye contact as if shy.

The red twintails jumped vigorously... This was her reflexive reaction whenever she felt extremely happy.

"T-Teaming up with Kamito alone, the last time was really so long ago!"

"...Hmm? Ah yeah, now that you mention it."

Thinking back, Team Scarlet's original members were just Kamito and Claire.

When he first arrived at the Academy, even acquiring the five members required to apply for participation in the Blade Dance festival seemed like a challenge.

...Clearly it was only two months ago, but somehow recalling the memory stirred up deep emotions.

"--Besides, you still have me."

Est expressionlessly murmured from a corner of the table.

Chapter 3 - Nepenthes Lore

Part 1

After making simple preparations, Kamito and Claire set off quickly.

They traveled light, keeping their load to a minimum. Est also transformed back to sword form at Kamito's waist. Entering a dormant state and completely cutting off her consciousness, she could not awaken by her own will without Kamito's infusion of divine power.

The guide spirit hovered lightly in the air -- a mass of weak flame before the two of them.

As long as they followed it, they would not get lost even within the forest.

"H-Hey, Kamito..."

"Hmm?"

Claire tried to start a conversation with Kamito who was walking in front.

"Umm... N-Nothing..."

"Hmm, is that so..."

Then conversation went dead.

...Repeating for who knows how many times. Starting from a while back, her efforts always followed this model .

(...~Seriously, what is going on with me!?)

Claire knew very well the reason was herself. Overly self-conscious about being alone with Kamito, it had become impossible for her to talk casually with him as usual.

(...Kamito, would you think I'm acting strange?)

She gave a quick glance at the figure walking before her--

Kamito looked completely nonchalant... This was slightly maddening.

(However, being able to team up with Kamito, truly is. ..)

In actual fact, the only time when Claire monopolized Kamito was the first few days after they met.

Disregarding Kamito's contracted spirit Est, there was Fianna who had moved in as Claire's roommate in the female dorms not long after that. On top of that, Kamito had also been recruited by the Sylphid Knights, which meant he had to participate in the Knights' work in addition to their morning meetings, further reducing the time he had for Claire.

Furthermore, at dinner time every day, Rinslet would " accidentally cook too much" and bring the food to the room to share with everyone.

--Ever since the Blade Dance festival began, Claire and Kamito's time alone had been reduced more and more.

(B-But, only now it is different...)

Also, even though the reason was suitability for the negotiation role, Kamito did indeed choose Claire as his partner to venture forth... Simply this fact was enough to make her overjoyed.

(If only I c-could be slightly more honest...)

As they went on their way, she quietly gazed at Kamito's back--

"--Wah!"

Suddenly, she found her foot entangled by something smooth and slippery.

"...Claire!?"

Kamito suddenly looked back.

There was a small snake around her foot.

Kamito swiftly bent down, grabbed the snake by its head and threw it away in the forest.

"You okay? Were you bitten?"

"I-I'm okay... Just had a little fright."

"...You're afraid of snakes?"

"I-I'm not afraid! ...I just don't like them."

Claire diverted her gaze, her face all red.

"...Isn't that the same thing? Anyway, can you stand up ?"

Kamito grabbed Claire's hand and helped her up from the ground.

"Ah, yes... Thank you."

Her heart was pounding within her chest. Even without a mirror she knew her face must be burning red like having a fever.

...She felt so embarrassed that she could not look Kamito in the face.

"Then let's continue--"

Kamito released her hand and was about to start walking--

"Ah, w-wait up!"

At this time, Claire chased after Kamito and grabbed his hand, gripping it tightly.

"...Claire?"

"...T-This is better."

"...Eh?"

"...I said this is better. Escorting the master is the slave's duty."

"H-Hey...!"

Holding Kamito's hand, Claire began to run quickly.

Kamito had no choice but to hurry and keep up with her.

(Uwahwah, seriously, what am I doing!?)

Due to her unintentionally bold behavior, Claire's face went completely red.

Part 2

Taking a short break along the way, Kamito and Claire continued making their way through the forest and finally reached the destination.

The fire spirit guiding them began to circle in one spot before some decrepit ruins.

These ruins probably dated back to the distant past, legendary times when the mainland and Astral Zero were still uniform -- the mythical age when this shrine was still in use. The walls had virtually all collapsed, and the only reason why it still managed to maintain some of its original shape was very likely thanks to those stone pillars embedded in the ground.

The other side of the ruins faced a cliff and one could hear the noisy rumbling of rapids.

"This should be the negotiation site--"

"The ruins of an ancient shrine. With a river nearby, this is quite an ideal environment for a stronghold."

"Hurry and look, here are traces of a built barrier."

Following the direction Claire indicated, Kamito found a stone pillar where a pattern resembling a crest was carved.

"...The sacred seal of the Principality of Rossvale. And very new too."

Claire murmured incredulously.

"However, there were no signs of a barrier activating when we entered, right?"

"...That's right. The barrier was destroyed. This place has already lost functionality as a stronghold."

"What happened?"

--The Rupture Division abandoned this stronghold?

Or instead--

"Hmm?"

Icy cold water drops fell upon Kamito's forehead.

"It's raining..."

Sheltering his eyes with one hand, he looked up to find the sky had filled with dark clouds without him noticing.

As raindrops fell pitter patter, it became a pouring shower within the blink of an eye.

"Uwah!"

"Is there no place to shelter from the rain?"

Claire draped her uniform jacket over her head and frantically surveyed the surroundings to find a cave beneath the cliff near the ruins. This was no natural hole but a place someone had dug out using the power of spirits.

"Over there, hurry!"

"Ah yeah..."

The two of them quickly ran towards the cave.

The cave ran deeper than imagined. It was completely dark inside. Claire chanted a spirit language incantation to light a small fire at her fingertip, thereby illuminating the uneven walls of rock.

The remnants of a campfire could be found in the cave.

"The Rupture Division apparently had a bonfire here."

"...In that case, let us make good use of it."

The two of them sat down by the campfire.

Claire brought the flame on her fingertip close and immediately lit the campfire.

"I didn't know rain was possible in this place."

Since Ragna Ys was above cloud level, one would not expect any rain--

On further thought, it would have been strange to have plants flourishing without rain. Furthermore, there was the existence of rivers and lakes.

"Ragna Ys doesn't always float above the clouds. We may not be able to tell while we're on the island but it does move according to a cycle. Currently, it must be beneath cloud level."

"...I see."

The downpour showed no signs of letting up.

Kamito and Claire were completely drenched.

"...Sigh. If the other negotiating party isn't present, it can't be helped."

Untying the ribbons on the ends of her twintails, Claire sighed.

"Even a trap would be a better situation than now."

"...Come to think of it, where would they go after abandoning their stronghold?"

Faced with Claire who had untied her ribbons to let down her hair--

"...!?"

Kamito was shocked.

(...T-This girl is too careless!?)

Her red hair looked exceptionally seductive when wet.

Illuminated by the glow of the campfire, her supple body displayed beautifully gentle contours.

As her drenched uniform clung tightly to her skin, the lace patterns of her underwear became vaguely visible.

"...Kamito, what is up with you?"

Claire asked with a puzzled expression, tilting her head.

Clearly she was unaware how attractive and tempting her current appearance was.

"Ah-- ...Umm, how should I put it..."

How on earth could he point it out, just as Kamito agonized--

"...Yah!?"

Claire finally noticed her appearance and frantically curled her drenched body into a ball.

"Ah, mmm, ah..."

Under usual circumstances, surely she would have started whipping him with Flametongue. However, this was not Kamito's fault this time, and Claire simply went into a panic with a blushing expression.

"--Achoo."

Claire sneezed adorably.

"If you remain wet, you're going to catch a cold."

"I-I know! Kamito, turn and face the other way!"

"A-Ah, right..."

Kamito turned and faced the wall, shutting his eyes.

Rustle rustle... Rustle.

Against the background noises of the intense downpour, the seductive sound of clothes sliding off the body seemed unnaturally loud.

...What the heck was with this sound of undressing right now?

Keeping his eyes closed, Kamito found it even harder to stop his imagination from running wild instead.

"I-It's okay now..."

Receiving permission, Kamito turned back towards Claire.

"I can open my eyes?"

"..."

"Claire?"

"Y-You can..."

A hesitant answer.

Kamito opened his eyes--

"...Wha!?"

Appearing before his eyes was a scene far too excessively stimulating for a boy of his age.

Stripped of her uniform, Claire was only wearing a single article of underwear.

Furthermore, it was simply a pair of very sheer lace panties. She was almost completely nude.

Her smooth skin, as white as snow, adorned by the bright crimson hair draped over her body, was quite an erotic sight to behold.

The only saving grace was the fiery hell cat she embraced against her chest to hide her topless state.

"Why, why are you looking like that..."

"T-This is the Scarlet Guard maneuver!"

Claire shifted her gaze as she displayed a shy expression.

"Never mind me, you should hurry and strip too!"

"...Me?"

"Do you intend to leave me as the only one in this embarrassing state?"

"A-Ah right, I got it..."

Glared at sharply, Kamito had no choice but to nod and agree.

Perhaps due to Claire's seductive appearance, his mind was probably in a total state of shock.

As Kamito took off his wet shirt, Claire's cheeks instantly blushed bright red completely.

Just as he was about to take off his pants--

"Yah--"

...A light scream was heard.

"Y-You're the one who told me to strip!"

"Uh, right... Sorry."

Underneath, Kamito was wearing half-pants that could be used as swimming trunks. Since he was dressed the same way for the purification ritual by the lake, a reason to be so surprised... Should not exist in theory.

"..."

"..."

Then for a period of time after, both were stuck in silence.

There remained only the noise of the campfire crackling away.

(W-What the heck. This embarrassing mood...!)

Gulping down a mouthful of air, Kamito furtively cast a glance towards Claire.

With her ribbons untied and hair down, Claire seemed to possess much more adult charms than usual.

Light reflected off the smooth skin of her neck. As soft as fresh snow, her gorgeous body seemed like it would melt at the mere touch of the finger. Having taken off her kneesocks, her thighs were so dazzling Kamito did not dare stare directly.

The fabric of her panties was also quite sheer and offered a slight glimpse of the luster of the wet skin beneath.

"...!?"

Shocked, Kamito intended to shift his gaze--

"Hey..."

"Hmm?"

"...Say something, find something interesting to talk about."

"That's really putting me at wits' end... How could I find something interesting to talk about, being asked so suddenly?"

Kamito answered in amazement.

For Kamito who had devoted his life to training for battle since childhood, asking him to chat and entertain a girl was a tall order indeed.

"Talk about anything you want. I'll be the one to decide if it's interesting or not."

"...Easier said than done. Oh... Got it, that time when I was patrolling the school grounds with Ellis--"

"Not allowed to talk about other girls. That's not interesting at all."

...Somehow making her displeased, Kamito was cut off as soon as he started.

"...What a willful young lady you are."

Kamito crossed his arms and racked his brains.

(An interesting topic, ah...)

Then -- Suddenly, he recalled.

In the past, when Kamito was still a young boy--

Every night, that person would tell him a bedtime story.

These stories, originating from a distant desert country , were so numerous it would take a thousand and one nights to tell them all.

Night after night, she would tell these stories to him. For Kamito's days as a young boy, this could be considered his only joy. Every time Kamito hassled her to tell these stories he liked, she would patiently recount them to him. Even now, he could still recite some of the content.

(That's all I can think of to talk about...)

Kamito coughed lightly and began to speak.

"A long long time ago, there was a spirit sealed in a lamp at a certain place--"

"Excuse me, Kamito..."

"...Yes?"

"I'm sorry but I already know this story. It's very famous on the mainland, you know?"

"I see..."

Come to think of it, Claire really loved reading... It was only natural for her to know the story.

Finding his treasured story rejected, Kamito could not think of any other tales to tell.

Surely, Claire would be interested in his experiences with that particular girl after escaping from the Instructional School. But bringing that subject up would inevitably lead to the incident three years ago.

"...Sorry. I'm out of ideas."

Kamito apologized honestly.

However, Claire did not seem particularly displeased, but smiled tenderly.

"A man who is too boring in conversation is no good, you know? Next time, try harder to prepare before your next date."

"Date?"

"...Ooh, n-no that's not it! I-I simply said something wrong by accident!"

Claire hugged Scarlet tightly, causing the cat to cry out in surprise.

"...The rain still hasn't stopped."

"Yeah..."

Claire sighed softly.

"After the Principality of Rossvale's team abandoned this place, where could they have gone?"

"Already eliminated by other teams -- perhaps?"

"Given the level of power of those members of the Rupture Division, do you really think they could be eliminated so quickly?"

"However, only if that happened would the alliance invitation make perfect sense. Perhaps not completely eliminated, but their team must be half destroyed, in a state where they have no choice but to ally with others--"

"Impossible, right..."

Suddenly, what surfaced in Kamito's mind was--

The image of Team Inferno's black knight mentioned in his group's discussion this morning.

Also, the darkness spirit girl who took action together with the black knight.

(Restia...)

Seeing Kamito's gaze fall upon his left hand, Claire asked observantly.

"Say, Kamito--"

"What?"

"About that girl, could you tell me more?"

"That girl?"

"Your former contracted spirit -- that darkness spirit girl."

"Didn't you say I'm not allowed to talk about other girls?"

"Only now do I allow you."

Kamito sighed lightly.

He shifted his gaze slightly from Claire's bare body that was being illuminated by the campfire's flames--

"She -- Restia was responsible for teaching me back at the Instructional School."

"Teaching... Combat skills?"

"No, she taught me everything -- *Absolutely everything*."

That's right, what she taught me was not limited to battle-related skills.

She also returned to Kamito something precious he had lost.

"Really... Is that all?"

Claire looked pleadingly at Kamito as she asked.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Umm, that is..."

Faced with Kamito's counter question, Claire stammered as if she was at a loss for words--

Resolving herself, she spoke up.

"T-That... K-Kissed, you must have done it with the darkness spirit girl."

"...Huh?"

Kamito's face twitched.

"Did you actually... S-See that!?"

He recalled what happened during the night of the ball held in the castle at Ragna Ys.

In order to search for Claire who had disappeared after an argument, he met Restia who had suddenly appeared in the garden.

"I wasn't peeking intentionally! I-It was just coincidence, at the courtyard by chance I saw..."

"Don't have strange misunderstandings, okay? I was ambushed by a surprise attack."

Kamito explained desperately... Why did it sound so much like an excuse?

"...However, you're quite obsessed with that girl."

"That's only natural. She is my precious contracted spirit."

"..."

--That's not right. Kamito knew very well himself.

As an elementalist, treasuring one's contracted spirit was of course perfectly natural--

But to Kamito, Restia was a special existence not only because she was his contracted spirit.

(She gave me light... Or rather, to me back then, she was the very light itself.)

Claire did not seem satisfied with Kamito's answer.

Unhappily, she pouted those cute lips of hers.

"So, how many times in total?"

"Eh?"

"...O-Of course I'm referring to kissing. How many times?"

"W-Why are you asking a question like that!?"

"As your master, it is naturally necessary for me to know about the slave's affairs."

Claire replied with her face all red.

"...Answer me honestly. How many times have you kissed?"

"...Who knows."

Kamito replied stiffly.

"What, you're trying to dodge the question?"

"Why must I answer this type of question?"

"T-That is... What, are you actually angry?"

"I am not angry."

"...Clearly you're angry."

Claire pouted, sulking a little.

Apparently, the young lady was displeased.

Speaking of which, Kamito never expected Claire to be so concerned about the matter of Restia.

Just earlier, she seemed so happy -- almost like the weather of this Ragna Ys.

Kamito sighed and looked out the cave.

Outside conditions were basically a storm. Violent winds were blowing and the rumble of thunder could be heard in the distance.

"...Thunder?"

Kamito suddenly looked up.

(--No wait, this isn't the sound of thunder!)

Listening carefully, he could hear the sound of blades clashing amidst the rumbling noises.

"--A blade dance in progress."

"What did you say?"

"The Rupture Division might be engaged in battle with others right now -- Hurry!"

Swiftly putting on his uniform that had yet to dry, Kamito grabbed the Demon Slayer resting against the wall and rushed out.

Part 3

Kamito and Claire equipped their elemental waffen as they ran.

In this storm, the sound of blades clashing was gradually getting closer.

The instant Kamito chopped down the tree before him, his view widened immediately.

An empty clearing in the forest--

"...!?"

A group of elementalists were collapsed on the ground .

The three girls' uniforms were very familiar -- that of Areishia Spirit Academy.

"They are Team Wyvern!?"

Claire exclaimed loudly as she caught up.

Likewise, they were representatives of Areishia Spirit Academy. A team formed from outstanding upperclassmen.

After Velsaria withdrew from the competition, these girls ascended to the spot of the Academy's top team.

The Ordesia Empire's most anticipated team.

But currently, three of them had fallen in this unusual situation.

Kamito instantly ran to the side of one of the upperclassman girls.

"...Hey, what happened here? Who defeated you?"

"Hmm... You're, that one from Raven Class, the male elementalist..."

The girl's lips quivered faintly. She was still conscious apparently.

"On the other side of these woods, our comrades are fighting--"

--Suddenly Kamito felt a terrifying sense of chill from behind.

The girl was pointing to the other side of the trees -- where a most ominous and frightening presence could be sensed.

"Kamito..."

"Yeah."

Kamito nodded lightly.

(...No doubt about it. It's that person's aura!)

The sound of swords clashing could be heard from the other side.

"Let's go... Est!"

Kamito released the power of the Demon Slayer all at once.

A dazzling silver-white glow emanated from the sword's blade.

Cutting down all the trees that lay in his path, he exited the forest--

Entering his view was a knight wielding a black sword to attack a girl.

Expressionless, eyes flashing red, the pitch black knight -- Nepenthes Lore.

Kamito rushed forward without hesitation, performing a full-powered attack at the black knight.

A sharp metallic impact. Scattering sparks.

In that very instant, the black knight's sword was deflected slightly, embedding itself into the ground mere inches away from the girl's body.

The afterglow of the black knight's red gaze shifted towards Kamito.

(...I knew it, this is no ordinary elementalist!)

In order to protect the collapsed girl, Kamito readied his sword in both hands.

Just behind the black knight, there was another collapsed girl in the same Areishia uniform.

(...To have single-handedly defeated five elite elementalists!?)

Team Wyvern's girls were the highest level elementalists at the Academy.

Their abilities were definitely no less than Claire and the girls--

"Kamito, stop taking action all on your own!"

Using Flametongue to burn away the trees in the forest , Claire arrived at the battlefield. She shuddered at the sight of the black knight, but instantly she understood the situation and circled around to a position where she could launch a pincer attack in concert with Kamito.

"Cough... The male elementalist, as well as the sister of the Calamity Queen..."

Behind him, the upperclassman girl protected by Kamito was moaning painfully.

Clearly he was here to protect her group, yet her eyes glared hatefully at him.

"This is my affection as a fellow representative of the Academy. I'm here to help your team, Senpai."

Kamito spoke stiffly as he glared at the black knight before him.

Even though the girls were fellow representatives of the Ordesia Empire, this did not imply they were his comrades exactly.

Nevertheless, he could not stand back and watch fellow students from the Academy being tormented so one-sidedly.

"Your help is not needed!"

"...I see. Oh well, think of this as us starting a blade dance on our own then."

As he faced off against the black knight, Kamito calmly assessed the surrounding terrain.

On the right side was the forest Kamito just exited. The left side was a massive cliff.

The thunderous sound of a waterfall could be heard coming from the bottom of the cliff. Although it was impossible to confirm visually from this position, surely falling down the cliff would be fatal.

(...A fight near the cliff would put me at a great disadvantage.)

Although Kamito was highly skilled with sword techniques, his arm strength was clearly inferior to the enemy's.

In a direct confrontation, he would probably be suppressed completely.

(In that case, this next attack will decide the outcome of the battle--)

Pouring divine power into the Demon Slayer, Kamito leaped from the muddy ground.

"I'm relying on you, Est!"

As Kamito rushed forward, at the same time--

"I'll turn you into charcoal!"

Claire attacked with Flametongue.

Through their training at the Academy, Kamito and Claire's coordination with each other had already improved dramatically.

Infused with scorching flames of conflagration, Flametongue wrapped itself around the black knight's wrist just as the sword was raised.

However, accompanied by a terrifying roar, the black knight easily snapped Flametongue in two.

Even though Claire's elemental waffe was capable of ensnaring first class militarized spirits, under this pouring rain, spirits of the flame attribute could not unleash their full power here.

Naturally, Claire herself was well aware of that fact. Her efforts were fully intended to play a support role for Kamito.

It was only a tiny opening. But Kamito definitely would not fail to seize the opportunity.

With even faster speed, he swung down the Demon Slayer -- !

Infusing the sacred sword with maximum divine power, this strike was not one that could be blocked by just an arm-guard.

(--Success!)

Just as Kamito firmly believed victory was in his grasp , in that very instant.

The black knight vanished. Kamito was almost convinced the knight had sunk into the mud from the

impact only to discover his opponent had instead leaped over an unimaginably vast distance.

"...Wha!?"

Kamito was dumbfounded. This was not an action a knight in heavy armor could perform.

(...Impossible!? A human body could not possibly move like that--)

Roaring, the black knight began to charge, producing wind pressure that swept up dust from the ground.

Kamito readied his stance once more and swiftly analyzed the situation.

Even as the strongest class of elemental waffe, Terminus Est had her weakness.

Namely, overwhelming consumption -- vast amounts of divine power were depleted from the wielder.

Compared to the very beginning, Kamito was now able to control power consumption much more easily. Nevertheless, he still could only sustain the released state briefly for mere minutes.

(Plus this storm here, this is gonna be tough...)

In the context of blade dancing where split-second actions could decide the victor, the effect of strong winds could not be ignored. Without being blessed with wind protection, it was impossible for an elementalist to perform high level sword skills in such conditions.

Kamito felt his uniform clinging heavily against his skin, drenched with rainwater. The muddy ground also confused his sense of balance.

Furthermore, the black knight who had evaded Kamito's attack moved in an extraordinary manner.

These were neither the swordsmanship of a proper knight nor the myriad varied skills of an assassin.

These were motions Kamito had never witnessed before.

(I should be able to evade this attack -- but I can't predict the one afterwards at all!)

With horrifying pressure, the jet black great sword approached.

(--In that case, I have to defeat him directly head on!)

Kamito made his decision. He believed in the power of his most excellent partner, Est.

"--Dispassionate Queen of Steel, may you crush all enemies before you!"

"What are you trying to do, Kamito!? Hurry and evade !"

Ignoring Claire's scream-like cry, Kamito stepped forward instead.

"Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Swinging the Demon Slayer down hard from overhead , he struck the jet black great sword.

With an eruption of light, the shockwave shook the air.

In that instant, with an intense showering of sparks, the jet black blade was completely shattered.

Apparently, the great sword was not an elemental waffe but a sword materialized using spirit magic. That sort of thing could not possibly withstand an attack from the strongest sword spirit.

"The name of the Demon Slayer is not just for show!"

He had no idea what kind of moves the black knight was using.

But Kamito believed firmly.

(...It's fine! The way I am now, I cannot lose!)

As he prepared to make a thrust -- at that moment.

Numerous jet black chains sprouted from the gaps in the dark armor, flying towards Kamito to ensnare him.

"Wha!?"

Kamito reacted immediately, crouching down on the ground to evade the attack.

"Kamito!"

Claire swung Flametongue and severed the chains with a crimson flash--

However, the jet black chains swiftly regenerated and targeted the girl collapsed behind Kamito.

"...This is bad!"

Kamito smacked his lips, discovering that he was not the target.

Captured by the chains, the girl screamed briefly.

Her whole body convulsed violently, then went limp as she lost consciousness.

(Chains formed by magic -- was that group from just now also defeated by these chains!?)

The chains slid back to the black knight's side--

In the next instant, black mist spewed out from the crevices of the armor.

"...Wha!?"

Kamito's entire body shuddered.

The unidentified sense of pressure given off by the black knight expanded all at once.

"Could it be, the absorption of divine power...?"

Claire was so shocked her voice trembled. At this moment--

"--Oh my, I never expected to run into the wolf himself while chasing after little rabbits."

"...!?"

The voice coming from the air was--

Kamito's expression instantly froze.

Beside the black knight, dense darkness descended.

The swirling darkness gradually took on the form of a black-winged angel possessing otherworldly beauty.

The darkness spirit who appeared was a girl with lustrous long black hair. Her dusk-colored eyes carried a sense of melancholy.

"Restia...!"

Kamito forgot to raise his sword and called out the name of his past contracted spirit.

"I didn't expect to meet you here... Kamito."

The darkness spirit girl smiled tenderly at Kamito.

This was a pure and innocent smile, exactly the same as in the past.

"...I didn't want to meet you in a place like this!"

Kamito silently shook his head.

During the morning meeting, he had already found out the fact she was acting together with the black knight .

Nevertheless, his heart had not accepted it entirely.

As soon as he pictured her performing a blade dance together with an elementalist apart from him--

He felt an intense stabbing pain in his heart.

(...Ah yes, I must be feeling jealousy.)

Calmly admitting to this fact, Kamito secretly laughed wryly at himself.

To think he actually harbored such a childish emotion.

"--That one there is your new contractor?"

Kamito questioned with frustrated impatience he could not hide.

"Let's not joke around. I have always been yours, Kamito... As long as you wish it to be so."

"..."

Kamito tightly gripped his leather gloved left hand.

"This is Nepenthes Lore -- the successor to the previous Demon King."

As if deriving pleasure from Kamito's reaction, Restia smiled mischievously.

"...Successor to the Demon King?"

"Or perhaps the *Demon King's Will* -- that would be a more appropriate name. That said, just as I expected, the

current power is still insufficient. More sacrifices are necessary."

"...What are you talking about?"

Claire interjected with great acuity in her tone of voice.

"Oh my, isn't this Miss Hell Cat? Hello to you there. I'm sorry I didn't get to greet you at the garden the other day."

"Ah, you knew I was there!"

The twintails stood up in surprise.

"Restia, what are your intentions... Why did you enter this Blade Dance?"

Kamito asked coldly.

As a result, Restia lightly closed her dusk-colored eyes --

"--I still have a Wish that must be realized."

"Wish? Your Wish three years ago, I already--"

Halfway through -- Kamito cut himself off.

Claire was still present. He could not let her know what happened three years ago.

"Know your place, darkness spirit. I don't care whether you are Kamito's contracted spirit. He is currently a member of Team Scarlet and my slave spirit. I will definitely not let you do as you please."

"Oh my, what are you going to do to me? Miss Hell Cat."

Restia glared coldly at Claire.

Lifting an index finger, she pointed straight at Claire's chest.

Her adorable lips began to chant a spirit language incantation--

(That's...!)

Kamito hastily came to his senses and rushed over.

An extremely small pitch black sphere of thunder had formed at Restia's fingertip.

"Claire Rouge, even though *she* had said you were not to be attacked under any circumstance--"

The black-winged angel displayed a merciless smile--

"You will surely become a hindrance to his awakening -- Hence, you shall disappear right here."

The expanding ball of thunder was released from her fingertip.

Hell Blast -- the strongest class of spirit magic under the darkness attribute.

Let alone a human's mortal body, even mid class spirits would be instantly destroyed on contact.

"Claire--!"

"Kamito!?"

Claire's eyes stared wide in surprise.

Infusing the Demon Slayer with maximum divine power, Kamito rushed before the ball of thunder.

Gambling everything upon Terminus Est's trait of magical resistance, he used the blade to block the expanding ball of thunder.

"AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!"

Intense pain attacked his entire body. Unable to endure for but an instant, he lost consciousness in less than a second.

Blown away flying by the exploding thunder and lightning, Kamito fell down the waterfall.

"--Kamito!"

Chapter 4 - Milla Bassett

Part 1

A youth was standing alone in this icy-cold darkness, a room that resembled a prison.

This was a young black-haired boy with fine facial features.

No light could be reflected from those hollow eyes of his.

At the youth's feet, several strongly built men were collapsed on the floor groaning.

"--Finished. What is the next training activity?"

It was a crisp voice that matched the child's age.

However, the voice was overwhelmingly devoid of natural emotion.

Observing from outside the room, the elders of the Instructional School were thrown into quite a commotion .

"There can be no doubt. He must be the promised child."

"Unmistakably, he is the one who inherited the Demon King's power."

All the men fallen on the ground were fairly accomplished assassins with substantial reputations in the underground circuit.

But in a mere matter of minutes, they were single-handedly defeated by a boy.

The boy's breathing had not even quickened the slightest from the exertion.

"What training is next?"

The boy asked again.

"The next opponent is not human--"

"...So, a beast from Astral Zero? Or perhaps, a spirit?"

The youth no longer had any emotion known as fear. In the past, human feelings once existed in his heart but they had all been destroyed a long time ago.

"--A spirit."

"Understood. All I need to do is crush that fellow like these guys, right?"

"...Correct."

The elders nodded.

"Well then, where's the spirit?"

The boy imagined a spirit resembling a giant beast.

However--

"Over here."

Appearing before the boy was a most adorable girl.

Slightly taller than the boy.

Lustrous black hair that reached waist-length. Dusk-colored eyes that seemed as if they drew your soul into them.

The boy widened his eyes in amazement.

It was quite a rare occasion for him to reveal a surprised expression.

"...A girl?"

"--Nice to meet you, Kamito."

Lifting the hem of her dress that resembled the color of midnight, she bowed to Kamito to perform a formal curtsy.

"The darkness spirit, Restia -- the highest ranking spirit in service of the previous Demon King."

"This person, is a spirit...?"

It was only natural for the boy to be in doubt.

Up to this point, he had never met a spirit in human form.

"Amongst the highest ranking spirits, there exist those who maintain human form."

"She shall instruct you to reach further heights."

The elders' voices resounded within the prison-like room.

However, their words barely reached the youth's ears.

Completely unbelievable--

Watching mesmerized -- because of this beautiful darkness spirit girl.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, Kamito."

The darkness spirit smiled shyly and extended her hand towards the boy.

Suddenly, the boy swatted her hand away.

"Don't touch me. You will break, just like those guys fallen over there."

"--Is that so? How I look forward to your performance."

He did not miss the slightly hurt expression that only flashed across the girl's face momentarily--

The boy felt a mysterious sense of turmoil stirring within himself.

Part 2

"Guh... Ahhh... Ahhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Kamito awoke with the feeling of searing pain as if being burned.

"Hah, hah, hah... Guh..."

Burying his fingernails deep into his skin, he could not stop the exploding pain in his chest.

Enduring the intense pain as he lay on the ground -- finally, his breathing returned to normal.

"This place... Is...?"

Looking up, he surveyed his surroundings.

He could hear the sound of rain in the distance. But nothing could be seen with virtually no light.

This appeared to be the interior of a cave. The sound of water dripping could be heard.

As icy-cold water droplets fell upon his forehead, Kamito was finally able to ponder calmly.

(Right. After being hit by Restia's thunder attack, I fell down the cliff--)

Had it been a direct hit, he would have died instantly on the spot without any doubt. Without the protection of the Demon Slayer's strong magical resistance, his body would have been destroyed before he even hit the water.

"Right -- Where's Est!?"

He frantically searched his surroundings but the cave interior was too dark.

(Could it be that she fell into the river!?)

As soon as this possibility crossed his mind, Kamito's face went pale.

Due to Est and Kamito's contract being in an incomplete state, Kamito was unable to summon her at will from a distance unlike other elementalists.

Just as he was about to take out a spirit crystal from his uniform's pocket for illumination--

"--Did you wake up? Kazehaya Kamito."

"...!?"

A cold indifferent voice sounded out from the depths of the darkness.

Instantly, dazzling light filled the interior of the cave.

Over there was a girl holding a piece of spirit crystal for lighting.

Her knightly uniform was made of white fabric decorated with red linear designs. Her dark brown hair wavered in the wind.

Most striking of all -- were those eyes of hers that glittered like brilliant gemstones on her prim and proper face.

An azure right eye and an amber-colored left eye -- heterochromia.

Watching the mysterious heterochromic eyes of the beautiful girl, Kamito stared at her mesmerized, completely ignoring his lying down posture.

"Did you wake up -- I asked you a question, right?"

The girl walked over to Kamito and crouched down.

He could almost catch a glimpse of her skirt's underside. Kamito frantically averted his gaze.

"...Did you save me?"

The girl nodded.

"You lost consciousness by the river. You were lucky to have made contact with my detection barrier."

"...I see. Thanks for saving me."

Kamito stood up unsteadily and bowed his head to the girl.

The girl looked up and frowned with amazement.

"You're not wary of me? On this stage of the Blade Dance festival, do know that we are elementalists of opposing teams."

"I can't do anything so rude as to act wary towards my savior."

"Perhaps I have ulterior motives for saving you."

"Even so, that doesn't change the fact that you saved me. Also--"

Kamito shrugged as he spoke.

"You don't look like a villain. That's what my instincts tell me."

"..."

The heterochromia girl sighed as if exasperated.

Despite her clearly child-like face, her manner of speaking was very adult.

Wearing a white uniform with red designs, which country's representative is she--

At this moment, Kamito noticed the sword lying against the wall behind the girl.

"..Est!"

No mistake about it. That was Kamito's partner.

"This is your sword. Fallen into the riverbed, I fished it out of the water--"

Before she finished her sentence, Kamito instantly tried to run over--

"Gwaaaaah!"

Intense pain erupted all over his body, forcing him to collapse to the ground.

...Looks like bones were broken in many places.

"Do not move. Kazehaya Kamito, your body has not recovered yet."

"Looks like it... By the way, why do you know my name?"

"Isn't it only natural to remember the names of all the Blade Dance participants? Besides, you are the only male elementalist."

"...I see."

Actually, memorizing all the names of the participants was quite an achievement--

At this time -- Kamito suddenly remembered.

"I recall now, this uniform... You're from the Principality of Rossvale!"

"Correct, I am the leader of the Rupture Division -- Milla Bassett."

The girl with heterochromic eyes announced her name without any change in tone.

Part 3

Facing the girl, Kamito crossed his legs and sat on the cave floor.

Milla Bassett -- leader of the Rupture Division, was the youngest elementalist participating in this Blade Dance.

Even though self-introductions had been made, Kamito still felt rather puzzled.

No matter how he looked, this was just a young and beautiful girl. He could not feel from her any aura belonging to an ace-level elementalist like Velsaria or Leonora.

Instead, there was a dream-like quality that seemed to instill others with an impulse to protect her unconditionally.

(...Well, judging an elementalist by first impressions is very dangerous.)

Kamito muttered to himself then started asking the girl who sat before him.

"We came over here to negotiate our alliance with the Rupture Division, but your team did not appear at the appointed location. What happened, could you explain properly?"

"I must apologize to you on this point. I never expected the black knight to chase all the way into my team's stronghold."

"The black knight -- you mean the elementalist from Team Inferno?"

"Yes. The Rupture Division was destroyed by that black knight."

"Destroyed... Single-handedly?"

Indeed, that black knight -- Nepenthes Lore was definitely no ordinary elementalist.

However, if even the famed and powerful Rupture Division was destroyed--

Including Team Wyvern who fought above the cliff, there were now three teams vanquished by that monster.

"Furthermore, the black knight absorbs the divine power of elementalists, becoming ever stronger."

"Yes, I've already seen that."

Kamito did not know what kind of ability it was, but the black knight had used jet black chains to capture elementalists and absorb their divine power.

Kamito was still able to put up a fight earlier, but if this absorption of divine power continued, it would be impossible to oppose the black knight eventually.

"However, at the current time, there should still be a way to resist."

"--Which is why the alliance invitation was sent."

"Correct, an alliance lasting until the black knight's defeat. Although I cannot tell you concrete details about its abilities, the holy spirit contracted to me is extremely powerful. Your team will surely benefit from my assistance."

Her proposal was quite simple.

An alliance with Team Scarlet to oppose Nepenthes Lore.

"...Let me consider this for a bit."

"No problem."

An alliance proposed by a team facing imminent defeat.

Kamito pondered the implications--

What Milla Bassett needed was actually protection under the guise of an alliance.

The rules of the Blade Dance festival stipulated that so long as one member of the team survived, the rest of the team could still participate in the finals. But in actual practice, it was not quite possible for a single person to collect enough magic stones to qualify without the help of three or four teammates.

(Hence, she needs us to be her comrades...)

Also, her allying with Team Scarlet would bring benefits.

The holy spirit contracted to Milla Bassett.

Given a holy spirit that held a strong advantage against darkness spirits, this could serve as a final trump card to resist Restia and Nepenthes Lore.

(...It does make a lot of sense. There should be no trap by this point.)

If this were a trap, there would be no point in helping Kamito. She could simply have stolen his magic stone while he was unconscious.

Also, if allowed to power up continually, Nepenthes Lore would become Kamito and his team's greatest threat eventually.

(...When that time comes, would I really be able to win ?)

Calmly, he went over his memories.

Rather than the strongest blade dancer of three years ago --Kamito only had the power of his currently weakened state.

Claire, Ellis, Fianna, Rinslet... He recalled the faces of these four young ladies.

(With my power alone, will I be able to protect this important team?)

Alternating his gaze between the leather gloved left hand and the right hand that was branded with the sword emblem of the spirit seal --

Kamito finally responded.

"The alliance will last until the defeat of the black knight -- Nepenthes Lore, is that okay?"

"No problem. However, for the duration of the alliance , the distribution of acquired magic stones must be fair and equitable."

"Yes, I understand."

There were no objections on either side.

Setting a limited duration for the alliance was necessary at the very start. Since only four teams could reach the finals, allying to the very end would be a most naive notion.

"I have a question."

"What is it?"

"Why did you choose us to propose an alliance?"

Kamito was not suspicious -- it was simply out of curiosity.

"...What do you mean by that?"

"Even if you just consider the Academy's representatives, Team Scarlet is only ranked third. There are higher ranking teams -- for example, isn't Team Wyvern's stronghold quite close to yours?"

"Rankings are simply based on results at the Academy."

Milla stated monotonously.

"Kazehaya Kamito -- you are an extremely powerful elementalist."

"Not really--"

"You cannot play dumb. Last night, your blade dance with Leonora Lancaster--"

"You saw it..."

Kamito groaned with displeasure.

Speaking of which, the barrier had been damaged at the time and completely lost function. It would have been possible for spirit-sharing scouting spirits to invade the stronghold.

"At the time, all members of the Rupture Division were convinced that Team Scarlet would be eliminated the first day. However, you defeated Leonora instead."

"--I didn't win. At best you can call it a draw."

Kamito shrugged.

"Furthermore -- *for you in particular, a certain negotiation technique is effective*."

Milla glared coldly at Kamito.

"Huh?"

"The Principality of Rossvale's intelligence division has already discovered your fetish for young girls."

"What kind of intelligence is that!?"

"No need to deny it. It's not a problem."

"I'm not denying anything!"

"Reportedly, a fully nude young girl accompanies you in your sleep."

"...!"

In a certain sense, this was indeed the truth.

"N-Not completely nude... Est's is called the naked kneesocks look!"

"...Not a problem. This particular fetish is already known."

"That's not a fetish! Seriously, the Principality of Rossvale's intelligence is quite amazing in a certain sense. .."

There had been rumors of spies from other countries amongst the students at Areishia Spirit Academy. Clearly they were not unfounded.

"Let me be clear, naked kneesocks is definitely not my fetish!"

"Rest assured, I will service you in kneesocks as well."

"...Eh?"

Ignoring Kamito's troubled expression--

Milla began to undress.

"This is my first time, so I have no idea if I will do a good job..."

With unfamiliar movements, she undid the buttons of her uniform one after another.

Just as she was about to unbuckle her skirt--

"W-Wait a minute, what are you doing!?"

Kamito frantically grabbed the young girl's slender wrist.

Milla was surprised.

"...Isn't this what all men want?"

"N-No that's not it, so listen to me..."

From the gap in her unbuttoned shirt, her cute underwear was visible. This was really too stimulating a sight.

Monotonously, Milla spoke--

"Or what you're trying to say is, a thirteen-year-old body is not good enough?"

"Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaaah, j-just put on your clothes first, then we'll talk!"

Kamito yelled and stood up. In an absolute state of panic, he swiftly helped her put on the uniform jacket she had taken off.

"...Dressing in this way is more to your tastes?"

"No! Seriously, I can't understand you. Aren't we here to negotiate the alliance?"

"...Seduction has always been a very effective maneuver for winning over males."

"You, so that's what you're trying to pull..."

Kamito sighed deeply.

...I see, she was convinced that this would easily win over a man.

"Even if you don't do that, we will still form an alliance with you."

"...Really?"

Milla's heterochromic eyes blinked repeatedly.

"That's right. So don't do that anymore. Don't use your body as a tool."

"..."

Kamito placed his hand on the head of the surprised girl.

"Team Scarlet and the Rupture Division are hereby allied."

"Is that so... Very well then."

Milla breathed a sigh of relief.

--To be honest, the benefits of the alliance were not that pivotal for Team Scarlet.

A spirit of holy alignment was indeed useful but not critical.

However, this girl was Kamito's savior.

Furthermore, seeing this girl all alone having lost all her companions, Kamito felt that he could not leave her alone.

(...Looks like I'm really bad at dealing with abandoned kittens.)

Recalling the image of the twintailed hell cat girl, Kamito smiled wryly.

...Though he was also worried about Claire, he was sure she would not be taken out so easily--

Suddenly, Kamito noticed Milla was staring intently at him.

"W-What is it?"

"Kazehaya Kamito, if you don't bend down, we cannot exchange the Oath of alliance."

"Oh I see..."

The term 'Oath' was used for the ritual where elementalists exchanged vows.

It was quite commonly used when exchanging important promises.

If an elementalist were to break the Oath, that person would suffer harsh punishment. For example, they would be viewed as an enemy by the spirits and be cut off from the blessing of the leylines for the long term. Depending on the severity of circumstances, they could even lose the power to summon contracted spirits.

Kamito bent over to roughly Milla's height and raised his right thumb.

Likewise, Milla raised her thumb and pressed it against Kamito's.

"In the name of the Elemental Lords I hereby swear. Even if the heavens collapse and the earth splits open--"

"The contract we hereby exchange shall never be breached. Or else--"

"I shall be incinerated in eternal conflagration, until my shadow turns to ash--"

An oath composed using spirit language.

And the final step--

"...!?"

Milla stood slightly on tiptoe and kissed Kamito on the cheek.

"...Wha! Y-You, just now--"

"A kiss is necessary to establish an Oath. You can't possibly not know that, right?"

Milla continued to speak in monotone.

"That's true, but still..."

Kamito scratched his head, greatly troubled.

...Kissing girls was really too embarrassing.

Oh well, there were no rules requiring the location of the kiss to be the mouth -- that was his only salvation.

After a moment of bewilderment, Kamito--

Kissed Milla lightly on the back of her hand.

"Is this fine now?"

"...How surprising. An unexpected gentleman."

"Please get rid of that redundant 'unexpected'..."

Grumbling with displeasure, Kamito reached for Est resting against the wall.

His body was covered with injuries but not to the point of preventing him from walking.

"I plan on meeting up with my comrades, can we set off now?"

"I agree. Even though there is a barrier here, there is no guarantee that this place is safe."

The pair left the cave to discover the sky had already darkened.

Although not as severe as during the storm earlier, the rain still continued nonstop.

Looking up to find the cliff where he had fallen off, Kamito sighed.

...To think he was saved despite falling from that height.

(Hopefully, Claire was fine...)

Part 4

Meanwhile, within the forest stronghold, Ellis and Rinslet were preparing food.

In the stone pile on the riverside, a spirit crystal with a sealed flame spirit was glowing red.

Even though it was raining, thanks to Ellis' barrier of wind, there was no worry of the food getting wet from the rain.

"...It's getting dark."

Stirring the pot, Rinslet murmured with worry.

"Will Claire and Kamito-san be fine?"

"Worried about them?"

"O-Of course not... Ouch hot!"

Panicking, Rinslet splashed soup on her hand.

"There is no need to worry about those two. After all, their grades in practical training are top in school."

Ellis added to the pot sliced pieces of fish caught from the river.

"That's true..."

Rinslet sucked her slightly burned fingertip--

"But still, Kamito does hold the nickname of the Demon King of the Night, I'm really worried what he might do to the girls he's negotiating with..."

"Oooh..."

Ellis could not help but pause in her preparation of the fish.

"I-Indeed that is quite worrying. Of course, I-I am worrying about the girls on the other team."

"Y-Yes, I am worried about those girls too!"

"B-But even if Kamito is known as the King of Lust, he cannot possibly make a move on a thirteen-year-old, right?"

"Let me tell you a secret, a few days ago, Kamito-san, he did indeed say he wanted to try a sister sandwich with me and my nine-year-old little sister Mireille!"

...Although this did not actually occur, these delusions were as good as true from Rinslet's perspective.

"W-What did you say!? I am so jeal... Must condemn such indecency!"

Ellis stabbed the kitchen knife hard into the cutting board.

"...Seriously. How should I say this. Kamito is that kind of natural--"

"Natural public enemy of womankind!"

"T-That is so right. That guy keeps saying all these shocking things all of a sudden."

"That's right! H-He makes my heart race, c-causing me to act strangely!"

"Y-Yes. Listening to Kamito talk is bad for the heart... Hence, that guy is the public enemy of womankind!"

The two nodded vigorously in complete agreement.

...Taking advantage of his absence, they pulled no punches in badmouthing him behind his back.

However, what was unbelievable was that they were not actually angry with him.

"Oh my, this smells really good."

Fianna arrived and peered at the soup in the boiling pot.

"If you don't mind, how about I help as well?"

"We have enough help here!"

"Please have a well-deserved break, Your Highness the imperial princess."

Rinslet and Ellis shook their heads vigorously.

They were both well aware of Fianna's horrifying cooking skills.

"Come on... Don't leave me out alone."

Just as Fianna pouted --

Rustle -- The trees in the distance rocked violently.

"...!?"

The trio exchanged glances with one another in surprise.

If the visitor was hostile, then the barrier would have alerted them on contact--

As it turned out, the one who appeared out from the trees was a hell cat spirit wrapped in weak flames.

Due to the rain, it had become especially feeble.

"Scarlet!?"

"Did Claire and Kamito return?"

The trio rushed over to the hell cat spirit who was about to disappear.

With the last of its strength, Scarlet pointed its burning tail towards the thicket. Completely exhausted, it dispelled its material body and disappeared into thin air.

The three girls hastily pushed aside the shrubbery and found--

"Claire!?"

Drenched with rain and covered in mud, Claire lay there fallen.

Her prided twintails scattered and disheveled. There were also wounds all over her smooth skin.

"...What on earth could have happened!?"

"...O-Oooh..."

From Claire's lips came weak panting.

"--She's still conscious. I will perform healing magic. Hurry and prepare the tools for the ritual."

Fianna gave orders with a tense expression.

"Don't worry about me, so..."

Panting painfully, Claire spoke desperately with trembling lips.

"Ka... mito... Hurry and save him, Kamito...!"

Chapter 5 - Their Respective Nights

Part 1

Several days had passed since the boy encountered the darkness spirit girl.

His mind and body were completely defeated.

"Guh... Ah..."

Until this point, he had always had the confidence to overcome any of his training no matter how harsh or deadly.

In fact, there were many other children who had been brought to this place like him, but they had lost their lives instead.

No one expressed any mourning, sympathy or commendation towards their deaths. To the elders of the Instructional School, they were simply dismissed and disqualified, then tragically abandoned like broken tools.

This was the kind of hell where the boy survived.

He even obtained the power to crush a group of skilled assassins with his bare hands.

Nevertheless, this was only child's play.

In the last few days, that was what the boy discovered beyond a doubt.

"...Are you okay, Kamito?"

The darkness spirit girl watched Kamito with eyes of worry as he lay on the ground.

"...Don't... Touch me...!"

"...I'm sorry."

With a pained expression, the girl stopped herself from helping him up.

"Don't be angry. After all, my mission is to make you stronger."

"...Angry?"

The boy glared at the girl.

"Are you insulting me? --I have no feelings. I am simply a tool for murder."

The boy forced his body to get up despite it being covered with wounds.

Contrary to his claim, his inner heart was in turmoil.

It was neither anger nor hate, but some other -- emotion.

Hence, he absolutely must eliminate this emotion. Absolutely.

In order to become the perfect killing tool.

"Killing you is the order assigned to me. Hence -- I am only executing my mission."

"--Yes yes, that's right. Hurry and kill me then, Kamito."

Part 2

Kamito and Milla left the cave and walked through the forest in the night.

The area was completely dark. Without the spirit crystal for illumination, he would not have been able to see even his feet.

Terrifying spirits of the night were beginning to become active, and the cries of beasts could be heard from the distance.

"Kamito."

"...Hmm?"

Noticing a tug on his sleeve, Kamito turned his head.

"It is already late night. Trying to march in haste would be dangerous."

Indeed, night was the time when beasts and hated demon spirits became active.

Walking in the forest at this time was not a wise decision.

"No problem. I am already used to blade dancing at night."

Kamito tried to reassure her.

In reality, he had undergone combat training in a zero visibility space during his time at the Instructional School . To a professional assassin, this could be considered a basic combat skill.

"Blade dancing at night..."

Milla suddenly turned her gaze to Kamito with eyes of despise.

"Wait a minute, I'm not talking about some kind of nuanced euphemism for nocturnal activities!"

"I did not say anything of that sort."

Milla answered softly with mild surprise.

"Let's walk a bit further. After all, there's no way to camp in a forest like this."

"Understood."

Milla nodded.

"Are you afraid? ...If that's the case, would you like to hold hands?"

"Holding a girl's hand in a dark forest... That is completely the action of a kidnapping criminal."

"You..."

Kamito sighed with his eyes half-closed--

"Duck down quickly!"

Suddenly sensing something unusual, he hurriedly pushed her down onto the grass.

"...Kamito."

"Be quiet."

Kamito whispered by Milla's ear.

Above their heads, a blue-white fireball flew past.

The fireball constantly changed its shape as it flickered , circling around in the forest nonstop.

Probably a scouting spirit released by some team... It would be troublesome if Kamito and Milla were discovered.

The spirit circled for a while before disappearing into the depths of the forest.

"Hoo..."

Kamito wiped the sweat off his head. Although scouting spirits could be eliminated instantly, that act would be akin to exposing his position to the elementalist sharing vision with the spirit.

He was still suffering from wounds from falling off the cliff and his body had also accumulated quite a lot of fatigue.

To be honest, in his current condition it would be best to avoid enemy attacks.

"Kamito--"

"Hmm?"

"It's probably time for you to move."

"...S-Sorry!?"

His hand happened to be positioned on her chest.

Kamito frantically got up... The soft sensation still lingering on his hand.

"Since it was an emergency situation, I will let it slide."

Milla did not seem to mind. Patting the dust away from her skirt, she stood up.

Even though she was only thirteen years old, did she not feel even a bit embarrassed -- ?

Heightening their alertness, they continued their way through the forest.

"By the way--"

Kamito asked as they walked along the muddy ground .

"What kind of spirit did you contract with, Milla?"

Even though he knew it was a spirit with the holy attribute, there were still myriad forms. In terms of tendency, those that specialized in defense like Fianna's knight spirit Georgios were more common, but ultimately that was simply a tendency.

Variations in spirit type resulted in dramatic changes to the way they were used.

However, Milla quietly bowed her head.

"Even though our teams are allied, I cannot tell you. Because my spirit is a state secret."

"I see..."

Reaching a dead end, Kamito changed the subject.

"--So, is there a Wish you are trying to realize through this Blade Dance festival?"

Under normal conditions, this was a retarded question .

An elementalist who wanted to participate in the Blade Dance festival without her own wish could not possibly exist.

However, from this Milla Bassett girl--

Incredibly, Kamito could not sense that kind of motive.

Hence he was curious.

However.

"--There is none."

Milla replied.

"No? Without a Wish, then why--"

Why was she resorting to allying with another team, desperately trying to survive--

"I exist as a tool. As a tool, one must finish one's mission."

"...Tool?"

"...!?"

Kamito frowned with surprise.

If she called it a knight's loyalty it would have been fine -- but he felt that it was different from that.

Or rather, the impression he got from her, was a person who only lived to complete a certain goal -- in that case, tool was not an analogy but was meant literally .

(This girl...)

Kamito knew a boy who resembled this girl.

Having lost all hope, a boy who even forgot the feeling of despair in the end.

Abandoning everything that made him human, a boy who was cultivated as a tool.

(In that case, this girl is very similar to the orphan at the Instructional School -- 'my past self.')

Perhaps this was one reason why he felt he could not abandon her no matter what.

"..."

"...What is it?"

The heterochromic eyes stared coldly at Kamito.

Her emotionless gaze was very similar to Kamito's before having met Restia.

"No, nothing... Let's go."

Kamito quietly shook his head and continued trudging through the mud.

Part 3

"A-Ahh... Ka... mito... Kamito, he..."

Claire was lying on a simple futon in a tent.

Sweating profusely from head to toe, she was calling Kamito's name with an exceptionally suffering expression.

Her consciousness was still quite fuzzy and there was no life in her eyes.

"How's Claire's condition?"

Rinslet brought warm soup and asked with worry.

"A very high fever... It seems like she was running all the way through the rain."

Fianna quietly shook her head.

Claire's smooth skin was covered all over with scratches from branches.

"The wounds on her body are nothing serious, but if we don't do something about this high fever..."

"...Kamito... If we don't save him..."

"Currently, the Captain is summoning wind spirits to conduct a search. Once morning arrives, we will join the search party."

"...After all, the forest at night is too dangerous."

Fianna bit her lip with regret.

After being carried to the tent, Claire reported what had happened under her semi-conscious state.

The encounter in the forest with Team Inferno's black knight -- Nepenthes Lore, and the resulting battle.

In the midst of battle, in order to protect Claire, Kamito had fallen down a waterfall.

After that, Claire barely managed to evade the pursuit of the darkness spirit and the black knight. Trying to search for Kamito, somehow she lost consciousness when

her physical endurance reached its limits. By the time she came to again, she found herself back in their stronghold -- that was basically what happened.

Apparently, based on the situation, Scarlet had decided to bring the exhausted master back.

"If we don't, hurry up... Kamito will..."

"Wait a minute, what are you trying to do! You still can't move!"

Seeing Claire attempting to get up from bed, Fianna, uncharacteristically, scolded her loudly .

"But Kamito fell down a waterfall because he was protecting me..."

Normally quite strong-willed, Claire's eyes were now weeping with streams of tears.

Using the sleeve of her uniform, she kept rubbing her eyes.

"Seriously, you've returned to that crybaby from before."

"...N-Nothing like that, I am not a crybaby!"

Claire retorted angrily to Rinslet.

"Walking through the forest with a body in that condition, you will quickly turn into food for the beasts. Or are you trying to waste Kamito-san's wish to protect you?"

Rinslet reprimanded sternly, giving Claire no choice but to quiet down.

"But..."

"First thing in the morning, we will all set off together. But for now, you have to rest properly and recover your energy."

Fianna patted Claire on the head gently.

"This is specialized sweet medicinal soup. Ah, your favorite, peaches were also added!"

Rinslet handed over the hot soup, still steaming.

"...T-Thank you."

In a rare moment of obedience, Claire nodded and sipped a mouthful of the medicinal soup.

"Delicious..."

"Kamito-san will surely return."

"Yes, that's right..."

--Leaving the tent, Fianna and Rinslet silently exchanged glances.

Claire's sobbing could be heard coming from inside the tent.

Presumably after drinking the warm medicinal soup, her tension relaxed all of a sudden.

At this moment, Ellis arrived with a solemn expression .

"How is Claire's condition?"

"If she rests properly, she should probably recover by tomorrow. However, the fact that Kamito-kun fell down a waterfall right before her eyes seems to have given her a great shock."

"I see..."

"Any progress in the search for Kamito-san?"

"Although I have spread wind spirits all around, nothing of value has been reported as of yet."

Ellis bit her lip regretfully.

"Kamito-kun..."

"...He will be fine, right?"

The three girls fell silent.

Like Claire, they were all extremely worried about Kamito.

Blown by the chilly wind of the night, the leaves in the trees rustled and swayed.

Part 4

Intense sparks were scattering in the dark night.

"This thing, what a monster!"

A knight wielding a halberd elemental waffe cried out.

She was the vice-captain of Dracunia's Knights of the Dragon Emperor, Yuri El Cid.

Due to their large scale battle operations undertaken on the first day, the Knights of the Dragon Emperor had delayed their stronghold construction and were currently wandering the forest.

Teams without strongholds were regarded as perfect prey. However, despite the attack of enemies throughout their march, they still defeated all these reckless attackers without exception.

However, their third opponent was in a completely different class compared to the enemies earlier.

"Leonora-sama, this is no ordinary elementalist!"

"Beware of the black chains, those things seem to be able to absorb divine power!"

Wielding a great sword, Leonora Lancaster commanded her subordinates as she rushed forward.

As four dragon knights surrounded the black knight who melded with the darkness of the knight, Leonora valiantly charged.

The acute impacts of blades rang out.

The black knight and the dragon knight's swords clashed intensely.

"How shocking. Not only do they have the strongest blade dancer in their team, they also have this kind of troublesome--"

Leonora cried out in surprise.

The Dragon Slayer -- was without a doubt an elemental waffe of the highest class.

Nevertheless, the swings of her great sword were easily deflected by the black demon sword.

Furthermore, with each clash of the blades, the sharpness of the Dragon Slayer was steadily decreasing--

"A demon sword with darkness attributes eh? To think it could penetrate a dragon spirit's magical resistance...!"

As she took on the black demon sword's attacks--

"Well then, how about this move?"

Leonora chanted spirit magic.

"--Savor the dragon's roar, Dragon Ray!"

A burning crimson flash struck the black knight's helmet directly--

"Now is the moment, charge!"

Under the orders of the vice-captain, the dragon knights rushed forward.

Although not to the level of Leonora, each knight was a mighty and accomplished warrior.

As elemental waffen struck from all sides, the blades pierced the black knight's armor at the same time -- !

"Victory -- !"

Just as Yuri cheered loudly.

From the gaps in the armor, numerous black chains shot out like tentacles.

"...Cough... Hah...!"

Pierced in the chest by the jet black chains, the dragon knights all fell to the ground.

Nepenthes Lore delightfully emitted a fearsome roar.

Absorbing a massive amount of the girls' divine power --

"Impos... sible...!"

"Our elemental waffen should have pierced that armor ...!"

Just as one girl captured by the chains lost consciousness--

"Curse you, monster -- !"

Leonora severed the black chains using the Dragon Slayer.

"Leonora-sama."

"Do not look down on the dragon of Dracunia...!"

Infusing her entire body's divine power into her elemental waffe, Leonora charged.

As she blocked the black knight's massive body alone, she yelled at the vice-captain behind her.

"Yuri, prepare to retreat -- this is no ordinary opponent ."

"But our pride as the Dragon Knights of Dracunia, how could we be forced to retreat by a mere single elementalist--"

"Move it! Unless you want us all to fall right here!?"

"U-Understood -- !"

As expected of the Dragon Princess, Leonora had truly excellent instincts. Simply through several rounds of exchange, she had already realized the aberrant nature of the black knight before her.

Nepenthes Lore roared from beneath the armor.

The black knight's aura seemed far more powerful than before.

Yuri called her fire dragon spirit Lindwyrm to carry her unconscious teammate on its back. The two dragon knights who were still conscious also mounted their own dragon spirits.

Seeing they were ready, Leonora also returned the Dragon Slayer to the form of the black dragon Nidhogg and swiftly mounted its back.

Nepenthes Lore's sweeping demon sword produced jet-black lighting on its tip--

"--Retreat!"

At Leonora's command, the Knights of the Dragon Emperor flew away in a well-trained formation.

Immediately, the jet-black lightning exploded, destroying trees in the forest without leaving any trace behind.

--However, Leonora and her group were already gone.

Thanks to their strict regular training, Dracunia's knights had retreated in a most splendid fashion.

"..."

In the night forest, Nepenthes Lore's red eyes flashed with dazzling splendor.

The demon sword held in the black knight's hand disappeared as if melting away into the night sky.

A beautiful black-winged angel appeared out of the air , landing lightly on the ground.

The darkness spirit Restia, who had transformed herself into an elemental waffe by her own will just now.

"True to the reputation of Leonora Lancaster, how troublesome to deal with."

Restia placed her finger on her moist lips, smiling mischievously.

"Even so, suppressing the Knights of the Dragon Emperor, renowned to be the strongest, this is quite sufficient as an accomplishment -- *It is almost time for completion*."

The will of the Demon King awakened through forbidden magic -- Nepenthes Lore. This monster that had absorbed the divine power of numerous elementalists probably had enough power to rival *him* now.

"--Kamito, you just wait. I will now liberate your true self."

Restia's dusk-colored eyes looked up at the starry night sky.

"Very soon, I will be able to tell you. The true meaning of our encounter--"

Three years ago, devoured by her Wish, her past memories had become fragmented.

The way she was now, she was a completely different existence from the Restia of the past--

Even so, shining lustrously like a treasure, one important memory still remained.

A feeling sweet enough to bring stabbing pain to the heart.

Most likely, this was the feeling known commonly as love.

Only that particular day's memory was forbidden to be tainted by any person.

"--If possible, Kamito, I wish to die by your hand."

Chapter 6 - Night Assault

Part 1

Buried in the ground, the fire spirit crystal was glowing red.

Kamito and Milla were hiding behind a rock, warming themselves. Unlike a campfire, a piece of spirit crystal with a sealed fire spirit did not generate flames or smoke, conveniently avoiding detection by others.

Normally they would have met up with Claire and the rest by now, but due to the dangers of the night forest, they could not continue marching recklessly.

Kamito would have been fine alone but he was currently accompanied by a thirteen-year-old girl.

"Kamito, aren't you cold?"

Returned to the form of a girl, Est tightly gripped his arm.

"Ah, I'm fine."

As Kamito caressed her head, Est closed her eyes in enjoyment.

Though she remained expressionless as usual, probably because she had to stay in sword form for so long, Est was now trying to be spoiled.

"Kamito, so warm..."

Est kept rubbing her soft face against Kamito's arm.

Sitting opposite was Milla who cast a cold gaze at Kamito.

"You have been making your contracted spirit do this kind of thing all along?"

"No, it's not like that--"

"I am Kamito's sword. Kamito's wish is my command."

Est nodded expressionlessly.

"I see. Forcing a cute and innocent spirit to satisfy your desires..."

Milla's gaze turned colder and colder.

...This is no good. The misunderstanding is getting worse.

"S-So, you two must be hungry, right? If you don't mind, how about I prepare some food?"

Kamito tried to change the subject.

"Yes. I am hungry."

"Not a bad suggestion."

The two nodded.

(...These two, somehow they seem a bit alike.)

Kamito secretly smiled wryly to himself.

Then a few minutes later--

From behind the rock, appetizing aromas came drifting.

It was simple cooking using the hard bread Milla brought as rations, adding a few slices of smoked meat, seasoning slightly with some spices and heating with a fire.

Nevertheless, to Kamito and his group who were famished, this was already quite a sumptuous meal.

"...Kamito, hurry and let me try it."

"What am I going to do with you, Est..."

Smiling wryly, Kamito tore a piece of bread and placed it in Est's mouth.

"This is delicious, Kamito."

Est expressionlessly chewed the bread... She really was like a cute little pet.

"Feeding a spirit eh."

Milla glared coldly at them.

"Okay, you don't have to be formal, just eat this quickly."

Kamito served the steaming bread before her.

"...I will not be bought with food."

"I'm not buying you with food. This is just thanks for healing me."

"..."

Milla silently received the bread and took a cute little bite.

"...Delicious."

"That's really wonderful."

Kamito exclaimed wryly.

The sight of the two pretty girls eating bread expressionlessly felt rather surreal.

"Your wound--"

"Hmm?"

Swallowing the bread, Milla slowly spoke.

"Healing so fast is completely thanks to your own recovery ability. My spirit magic had virtually no effect."

"Ah yes, I seem to have a constitution that is difficult for holy spirit magic to take effect."

Even though he did not know what caused it, that was what Fianna told him, so it should be accurate.

"...? In that case, how do you normally heal your wounds?"

Milla exclaimed in surprise. Kamito scratched his head , a little troubled.

"Ah, how should I describe it. One of my companions is a princess maiden, umm, she uses her body to transfer magic directly..."

"...Enough. I basically understand."

Milla gazed at Kamito with eyes of despise.

"Clearly the rumors of Kamito's teammates offering their bodies in service to him is true."

"Wait a minute, don't misunderstand!"

"Kamito, what does offering their bodies in service mean?"

Est tilted her head expressionlessly in puzzlement.

"Est, you don't need to know that sort of term!"

"Rather than through words, you will teach her using your body?"

"Milla, what on earth are you saying!?"

As Milla's gaze grew more and more severe, Kamito ruefully clutched his head.

Part 2

"Fuah..."

"Dinner is done, so it's probably time for Est to sleep."

Kamito gently rubbed Est on the head.

Est almost always slept at this time every night.

"Yes, Kamito. Entering standby sleep mode. Goodnight."

Est placed her head on Kamito's lap as if asking to be spoiled.

Her figure dispersed into particles of light in the air, turning into a beautiful sword.

Kamito rested the sleeping Demon Slayer lightly against the rock.

"You're not going to sleep, Milla?"

"Are you treating me as a child?"

"Nothing like that. With so much happening today, you must be tired."

"No matter how I think about this, you must be more tired than me."

"I can't go to sleep first while a girl is still awake, right?"

"...Girl?"

Milla tilted her head in surprise.

"Kamito?"

"Hmm?"

"Since I can't sleep, talk about something interesting."

...Somehow it feels like I keep getting this kind of unreasonable demand lately.

"I'm sorry. I'm the boring sort of man."

Kamito shrugged.

Regarding how boring he was in conversation, Claire knew best.

"Does not matter. I will be the one to decide if it's interesting or not."

"...Got it."

Kamito sighed, relenting--

"A long long time ago, there was a spirit sealed in a lamp at a certain place--"

Just like the time when Claire hassled him, Kamito began reciting the story he had heard from Restia. Instantly, Milla's eyes widened with interest.

"...Umm, you don't find this boring?"

"No, keep going."

Seeing Milla shake her head, Kamito continued.

Objectively speaking, Kamito's storytelling technique was quite poor. Nevertheless, recalling and imitating the gestures and tones Restia used when he was young, Kamito continued with the story.

Soon after--

"Fufu..."

"...!?"

Kamito stopped in surprise.

...Unbelievably, Milla seemed to be trying not to laugh.

"You..."

"...What?"

Noticing Kamito's gaze, Milla frantically avoided eye contact.

"You're very cute when you laugh."

"W-What are you talking about!?"

She lowered her gaze as if trying to hide her face.

(...Could it be, she's shy?)

Suddenly, Kamito asked a question that had been nagging at him.

"By the way, you called yourself a tool back then in the forest?"

"...So what?"

Milla recovered her usual cold expression.

"What do you actually mean by that?"

"Exactly as the word implies. Because that is the existence known as the elementalist."

"Elementalists are not tools. At least, not at the Academy where I go to."

"That is simply your own value system. I am simply a tool cultivated for winning this Blade Dance festival. That is the totality of my value."

Milla Bassett -- this girl, merely thirteen years of age, displayed an expression as if she saw through everything .

That was the same expression as the youth in the past.

What sort of treatment she received back in her home country, was easily imagined.

(A girl who lived only for the purpose of winning the Blade Dance...)

Too cruel -- Kamito whispered angrily to himself.

Her homeland was the small state which had gained its independence from the Holy Kingdom of Lugia not too long ago. Whether in military or economic strength, it was quite behind compared to the surrounding countries . Hence they were resolved to raise the prestige of their country through spectacular results at the Blade Dance festival.

Milla Bassett was the tool cultivated for this purpose.

--Hence firmly rooted in this belief, she gradually cast off her emotions as a human.

That was almost like himself, before he met Restia--

(I had Restia by my side. But this girl--)

Kamito could not help but speak out.

"Do you really, honestly believe that?"

"...?"

"Your value, does it only lie in winning the Blade Dance festival?"

"Other than that, I don't know any other way to live."

Milla shook her head, at this moment--

Suddenly, Kamito noticed a change in the surrounding atmosphere.

"Kamito?"

"...Seriously, it's this late and we still get visitors."

Hearing Kamito's words, Milla finally reacted.

Warily, they surveyed the surroundings--

"How surprising. I clearly eliminated all traces of my presence."

A girl's voice came from behind the rock.

"Even though your team is third, you are still representatives from Areishia Spirit Academy after all."

At the same time, other sounds came from the opposite side. Based on the footsteps there were two people.

(A chance encounter -- was of course impossible.)

Kamito licked his lips and reached for Est against the rock.

Very likely, this was the team who sent out the fireball scouting spirit earlier.

There was one person on the right and two on the left. An approaching pincer attack from two directions.

"--Knights owing allegiance to the courageous king, bestow upon me the light of victory!"

Milla chanted a spirit language incantation, manifesting a sword of spirit magic in her hand.

Standing up with her, back to back, Kamito asked.

"You're not summoning your contracted spirit?"

"My contracted spirit requires a special summoning ritual. It cannot be performed here."

"...A spirit of ritual summoning type eh."

Certain powerful spirits required summoning by ritual . For example, there was Team Cernunnos's beast swarm spirit. Milla's contracted spirit seemed to be the same. In exchange for great power, much time and energy had to be expended and it was therefore unsuited to blade dance duels between individuals.

Illuminated by the glow of swords, the enemies' appearances became clear.

Two of the girls were wearing uniforms similar to Milla. A red background decorated with white lines, they were opposite to the Rupture Division's uniform.

"The Holy Kingdom of Lugia's Sacred Spirit Knights--"

Milla's eyes widened.

So that was the case. After all, the Principality of Rossvale obtained its independence from the Holy Kingdom of Lugia. In that case, having similarities in their uniforms was only natural.

(By the way, isn't the Sacred Spirit Knights the team of Paladin Luminaris?)

Luminaris was the ace-level elementalist who reached the finals in the Blade Dance festival three years ago.

Served by a holy spirit, she had presented Kamito with a formidable challenge during the finals.

Though she was apparently not at the current scene, the Sacred Spirit Knights were renowned as one of the strongest teams from the mainland, all things considered.

Fighting with his current wounds while protecting Milla would be rather disadvantageous.

"--Ah, you're not going to retreat? If you run away now, we might let you off?"

"Stop joking around. Who would waste such an excellent opportunity?"

The knights jeered.

Most likely, they had received news of the Rupture Division's demise.

Even the fact that Milla Bassett's companion was *only a male elementalist belonging to a weak team* was perfectly clear to them.

Furthermore, the Holy Kingdom of Lugia and the Principality of Rossvale were hostile enemies. It was common for political conflicts between countries to be carried over into the Blade Dance competition.

(...Our only choice is to fight, right?)

Kamito raised his sword with annoyance.

"You too, if you give up Milla Bassett's *eye*, we could let you two off."

"Milla's eye?"

"Oh my, you allied with her without knowing anything?"

"..."

Glancing quickly at Milla, Kamito found her glaring silently at the knights before them.

"Milla Bassett's *eye* was originally our country's property. We are simply retrieving it."

"What on earth is this about?"

"There is no need for you to know, seeing as you are about to fall here."

Kamito shrugged helplessly... Apparently there was no room left for conversation.

Suddenly, the three knights tightened the encirclement .

"Milla, don't leave my side."

"Don't look down on me. No matter what, I am still the leader of the Rupture Division."

"...Got it. Then I'll entrust my back to you."

Instantly, the three knights attacked in concert.

The sound of blades clashing rang out. Intense sparks scattered in the dark night.

The strike of a heavy battle axe was blocked by Kamito using Terminus Est.

"...Guh!"

Intense pain came from his arm. Looks like the wound he sustained from falling down the cliff was rupturing.

(--Clearly these are masters. I can't be careless at all!)

Leaping to the side, Kamito held his sword in one hand.

"Don't think you can escape--"

"...!?"

Slicing wind, the massive battle axe flew through the air--

Due to this unexpected attack, Kamito reacted a second too slow.

"--Swarming subjects of the night, hasten forth to slaughter your enemies!"

Instantly, the flying battle axe transformed into a massive swarm of bats.

"...T-This is a legion spirit!"

"Legion" was the term for contracted spirits composed from an amalgamation of multiple spirits. Although they were unsuited to performing mundane commands, they were particularly effective against enemies who were not geared towards fighting multiple opponents.

As it happened, Kamito's Terminus Est was precisely a sword type elemental waffe, unsuited towards fighting multiple opponents.

Kamito swung his sword at the swarm of spirits that resembled a dark raincloud.

A slash from the Demon Slayer instantly destroyed the incoming wave of spirits--

However, this merely destroyed a small fraction of the total. The bat swarm of spirits gave off piercing cries as they attacked Kamito.

Sharp claws tore wounds all over his body. Red blood flowed from his ripped open skin.

"Guh..."

The rules of the Blade Dance forbade killing any of the participating elementalists. But conversely, so long as their lives remained intact, any amount of physical injury and suffering was permitted.

They must be trying to chip away at my stamina gradually.

(If only Claire's Flametongue was here, they could be incinerated in an instant...)

Kamito was unable to use spirit magic for large area destruction. Even though the swarm of spirits blocked his view, he was certain Milla must be currently fighting the other elementalists.

(Trying to kill these guys one by one will take forever...)

Raising the Demon Slayer, Kamito rushed into the center of the spirit swarm. With self-sacrificing

determination, he penetrated by force, intending to defeat the enemy elementalist directly -- !

"--Of course I'm not going to let your plan succeed. Capture the unrighteous, Shackles of the Criminal!"

"...!?"

Suddenly, flashing shackles appeared out of the air and locked down Kamito's feet.

In the middle of the chaotic and violent swarm of spirits, Kamito was immobilized.

"Those who attempt to escape the legion will be caught by the Shackles of the Criminal. The Sacred Spirit Knights' coordinated attacks are flawless."

Another knight jeered victoriously.

(I see. As expected of a strong and renowned team--)

Kamito silently cursed his dire situation. Using the legion to obscure his view while hiding the capturing type elemental waffe Shackles of the Criminal inside -- this was a coordinated attack that made use of the compatibility between their contracted spirits.

The legion mercilessly attacked Kamito as he stood there unable to move--

"...Your plan itself is not bad. But regrettably, you have underestimated my Est!"

Yelling out, Kamito infused divine power in the Demon Slayer.

"--How could this be possible!?"

The knights cried out in surprise.

Giving off intensely bright light, the shackles of the elemental waffe restraining his feet were cut into halves.

Wielding the sacred sword which emitted overwhelming dazzling light, Kamito charged forward.

The swarming spirits of the legion were destroyed as soon as they made contact with Terminus Est's sword aura.

"Damn it... Hurry and come back!"

The knight in front of Kamito frantically tried to transform the legion back into the battle axe form -- but unfortunately, it was too late.

Kamito rushed before her and slashed at the knight's abdomen.

"Gaaah--!"

With a great yell, the knight collapsed immediately. However, within Astral Zero all damage caused by elemental waffen beyond what the body could sustain were all converted into psychological pain, hence the girl simply lost consciousness.

At the same time, the black cloud-like legion dissipated into particles of light.

"Haah, haah..."

Stabbing into the ground his sword which has lost its brightness, Kamito rested his shoulder against it as he panted.

(This is really tiring...)

Terminus Est belonged to the strongest class of elemental waffe.

Hence, using it in the manner just now would deplete divine power almost instantly.

Deciding that she could not win one on one, the Shackles using knight stepped back with a click of her tongue.

On the other side of the rock, Milla was currently engaging the knight with the slender sword in an even battle.

Wielding a sword of light, she deflected the enemy's relentless strikes one by one, producing sparks whenever their blades clashed intensely.

Milla's sword skills were definitely not mediocre. Within the Academy, her skill level would definitely achieve top grades.

However on this Blade Dance stage where top class elementalists gathered, her power seemed slightly inadequate in comparison.

In terms of ability as an elementalist, the opponent was clearly superior to her.

Using his body which still could not stand steadily, Kamito raised the sword in his hand.

However, the Demon Slayer could only give off faint light.

"Clearly your power is depleted, male elementalist."

"Hmph, as if...!"

Forcing his unsteady body, Kamito began to run to aid Milla--

"--Your plan will not succeed, Shackles of the Criminal !"

The knight released a set of chained shackles from her hand. Kamito jumped to evade -- but the shackles were only a red herring.

Another set of shackles released from the opposite direction snagged Kamito's right arm.

"You no longer have the strength to break free from the Shackles now!"

In the instant Kamito's movements were halted--

The other knight that had been fighting Milla rushed over.

"--Kamito!"

"All I need is one arm."

Replying to Milla's cry with a smile, Kamito switched to wielding his sword with his left.

It was the left hand in the jet black leather glove. He could feel a stinging pain from Restia's spirit seal.

"--Very unfortunate for you, *but I am ambidextrous*."

With one arm snagged by the Shackles, Kamito kicked the ground.

Using one leg as a pivot to spin his body, he struck with a counterattack in response to the enemy's thrust.

The thrusting sword brushed past his face--

But at the same time, Kamito's sword pierced deeply into the opponent's heart.

"Guah...!"

Suffering massive psychological damage, the knight lost consciousness and fell to the ground.

Kamito held his shoulder due to the pain from slightly overstraining himself as he asked the Shackles user behind him.

"--Well then, you're the only one left... What are you going to do?"

"...!"

The knight bit her lip in regret.

"Don't forget this, Luminaris-sama will surely take care of you!"

Leaving behind this loser's speech, she disappeared into the depths of the forest.

At the same time, the Shackles restraining Kamito also vanished.

(Three elementalists of that level -- given myself three years ago, I could have handled them in seconds.)

As he muttered to himself in self-mockery, Kamito coughed up blood.

His body was actually not well enough to use Terminus Est with full power.

(...But to think I would end up like this.)

His body swaying he collapsed on the spot as if losing all strength.

"--Kamito, Kamito!"

Just as his consciousness faded, he heard Milla's voice.

Part 3

"--W-What is that!?"

"Could it be, a legion spirit!?"

The massive shadow towering before them was trampling the trees in the forest.

The minor country's team could only scream and flee into the forest as they watched the destruction of their stronghold.

Spirits in beast form swarmed and attacked the giant, but the giant swung its heavy fist, smashing the ragtag bunch of spirits to oblivion in a single strike.

"Ahahaha, you call yourselves representatives participating in the Blade Dance, and yet all you can do is this?"

On the shoulder of the giant -- the tactical class militarized spirit Colossus, sat a girl with ash gray hair.

The Instructional School's second Monster -- Muir Alenstarl.

Amidst rising black smoke and intensely burning fires--

The girl wearing the crimson mask gazed mercilessly at this scene of destruction.

The minor country's elementalists were struggling desperately, but given Muir's power, they would soon be vanquished together along with their stronghold.

"Ren Ashbell-sama, if this continues, the spirit will be broken by the usage of Muir's power."

Beside her, Lily Flame knelt on the ground, advising anxiously.

"Not a problem. Using a due to be scrapped militarized spirit to conquer a stronghold is worth it."

"But that Colossus was provided by the military of the Alphas Theocracy--"

"In any case, it is not a spirit those fellows can keep under control. Rather than expending effort to have it scrapped, we might as well break it through the use of the Jester's Vise."

Ren Ashbell shrugged and turned to Lily.

"That aside, have you found the location of the darkness spirit and Nepenthes Lore?"

"E-Excuse me... I am very sorry, not yet..."

Lily bit her lip regretfully.

The darkness spirit had taken away Nepenthes Lore without authorization, robbing divine power from elementalists indiscriminately -- such actions constituted clear betrayal of Ren Ashbell.

"I see. Then keep searching."

"Yes--"

"That said, even if that darkness spirit is scheming something, my plan will not change the slightest."

"Ren Ashbell-sama, may I ask a question...?"

Lily looked up and asked apprehensively.

"What is it?"

"What kind of a person is Nepenthes Lore?"

She was well aware that the monster of a black knight was no ordinary human.

That thing was revived by the master before her using forbidden magic, an existence that should not exist in this world.

But ultimately, what was its true identity -- ?

Deep behind the crimson mask, those burning red eyes seemed to pierce Lily right through.

"Please forgive me for overstepping my bounds!"

Lily immediately knelt down and prostrated in regret.

Simply a glare was enough to give her a feeling of fear as if her heart was being gripped tightly.

"--That Nepenthes Lore is the successor to the past Demon King."

"Successor to the Demon King...?"

"In other words, the incarnation of the will of Ren Ashdoll who was buried in ancient times--"

A dark shadow flashed across her fiery eyes.

"--*An existence identical to mine*."

Chapter 7 - Return

Part 1

Ever since the youth resolved himself to kill the darkness spirit girl who sent his heart into incredible turmoil--

He began to grow and develop with unbelievable speed.

Even the elders who decided to have them meet had not anticipated this. By this point, even amongst ranked elementalists who also trained at the Instructional School, there were few who could match him in combat.

"You're not going to kill me?"

"I will -- One day, surely I will."

Throughout the deathmatch training sessions which lasted several hours at a time--

Somehow this exchange became their standard catchphrase.

After each deathmatch, the boy would have long involved conversations with her.

The darkness spirit girl told all sorts of things about the world to the boy that he had never known.

Such as the sorrows, joys and various wonderful things that filled the world.

Then every night before the boy went to sleep, the girl would gently tell a bedtime story by his side.

--To an observer, this was quite an incredible relationship.

"And then, the king sealed the spirit of the lamp once more--"

"...Then what happened?"

Placing his head on the girl's lap, the dissatisfied boy sought the story's continuation.

Because she always stopped at the most exciting spot.

"Let's continue the next part tomorrow."

Gently caressing the boy's black hair, the girl smiled.

Clearly those fingertips had been firing off merciless magical attacks at the boy just a while ago.

"Tell me now. Who knows if I'll still be alive tomorrow ."

"Ah right, tomorrow is the mission to destroy the great shrine--"

A mere twelve-year-old boy was already starting to take on missions assigned by the Instructional School.

"The one in charge of destruction is Muir. Lily and my job will be covering and assisting her. Within the Great Shrine, there are reportedly eight elite spirit knights as guards."

"Will you survive?"

"Who knows. I am a tool -- I only have to follow orders and complete the mission."

"But if you die... You won't be able to listen to the continuation of the story."

The boy suddenly opened his closed eyes.

"...What a bother."

"Even if it is just to listen to the rest of the story, please return alive."

"...Yes, that's right... I got it."

The boy nodded with upfront honesty.

"Also, don't forget our promise--"

"Promise?"

"I will be the one to kill you."

"Fufu, of course."

This was not fear of death. However, I must survive -- thought the boy to himself.

For the sake of the promise with her--

Part 2

"Uh, hmm..."

Feeling the back of his head resting on something soft and comfortable, Kamito woke up.

Opening his eyes, he found a cute girl's face.

"...Milla!?"

"You must continue lying down."

Saying that, Milla pressed Kamito's head down hard on her thighs.

Feeling her smooth soft skin against his cheek, Kamito could not stop his heart from racing.

With no other way, Kamito had no choice but to continue lying down in this manner.

The sky was still dim. Night had only just ended.

...A lap pillow, how nostalgic.

(Back then, I always went to sleep on her lap...)

Keeping his eyes opened, he stared blankly--

"You can't sleep?"

"Yeah. I have the type of body that can do without sleep."

"Really... That's the same as me."

"Milla too?"

"Because that was how I was trained."

Kamito could not help but groan.

...Right. Just like Kamito, she was raised as a tool.

(Isn't that identical to what those Instructional School guys were doing...)

He felt intense wrath towards the Principality of Rossvale's knights who raised Milla.

Furthermore, she did not have anyone in her life like Restia who was with Kamito.

Kamito slowly got up from Milla.

"This is, yours--"

Milla extended over two magic stones.

"Hmm? Ah right..."

These were apparently the magic stones from the two members of the Sacred Spirit Knights.

Kamito took one and left the other in Milla's hand.

"...?"

"This is for the Rupture Division. Didn't we agree to share the magic stones fairly?"

Milla shook her head.

"You defeated them, Kamito."

"We are allies."

Forcing Milla to hold the magic stone properly, Kamito stood up.

For a while, Milla stared at the magic stone in her hand --

Finally, she nodded slightly and placed it in a pocket in her uniform.

"Kamito..."

"Hmm?"

Milla looked up at Kamito.

The azure right eye and the amber left eye, those heterochromic eyes were staring at Kamito.

"My *eye*, you're not going to ask about it?"

"...Eye?"

--Come to think of it, those Sacred Spirit Knights did say something about Milla's eye.

"You want me to ask?"

"..."

"Milla, if you ever want to tell me, then let me know when the time comes."

Kamito shrugged, just at this moment--

From overhead, the sound of feathered wings flapping could be heard.

"What?"

The two turned their gaze towards the sky to find a demon bird circling in the air above with its great wings spread.

"That's... Ellis' Simorgh!"

It was far in the distance but Kamito was certain. That was the demon wind spirit contracted to Ellis.

"You recognize it?"

"Yeah. Look, my comrades are searching for me."

Soon after, the demon wind spirit slowly landed before Kamito and Milla.

Kamito asked the demon bird directly as it folded its wings.

"Is Claire okay?"

Simorgh nodded as it crooned softly.

...Looks like she is fine.

"Really... I'm glad to know that."

Kamito breathed a long sigh of relief.

"Go and tell everyone that I'm fine. I'll be back soon."

With a cry, Simorgh took to the rosy skies.

"Let's go, Milla... Time to set off."

The two hastily gathered their camping equipment.

(That girl Claire, surely she must be angry...)

Part 3

Claire was lying on the futon under a blanket.

Her body curled in a ball. She still had some leftover fever.

"Kamito..."

Softly murmuring his name for who knows how many times.

Claire tightly gripped one side of the blanket.

Absentmindedly, she cast a glance towards the little mirror by the bed side.

"What a tragic looking face..."

Her prided hair in a mess, her eyes were all red from crying all night.

"--Clearly from the day I lost my older sister, I promised myself never to cry again."

On the little table, there was breakfast covered with a sheet of cloth. Probably brought by Rinslet.

...But surely I have no appetite right now.

(Kamito, without you by my side, I...)

What was with this pain in her chest?

...Loneliness? No, even though that was partially the reason, there was more--

(I've done so many bad things to that guy in the past...)

Claire reflected over everything she had done till this date.

Whenever Kamito was intimate with other girls, she always felt enraged for no particular reason, unable to accept, wanting to whip him and burn him into charcoal--

(...I really am a fool. Clearly now, I can be a bit more forthright.)

Just as she sighed--

Something squirmed beneath the blanket.

Puzzled, she pulled away the blanket to find the hell cat spirit enveloped in gentle warm flames.

"Scarlet..."

Claire suddenly felt very touched.

Clearly Scarlet was also in a very weak state, but the cat still stayed by Claire's side to provide warmth.

"Meow..."

"...Y-Yes. As the master, I must have faith in that guy."

Encouraged by Scarlet, Claire rubbed her eyes.

Patting her face, she tied her hair with her favorite ribbons.

"...That's right. I can't give up. Kamito is surely still alive."

Her spirit renewed, she got up and started eating breakfast in large mouthfuls.

This was no proper manners for a lady hailing from a formerly prestigious family, but now was not the time to be concerned... She had to recover her energy as fast as possible to search for Kamito.

Just at this moment, a clatter of footsteps could be heard. The entrance to the tent was flipped open with a smack.

Rinslet arrived, clearly frantic.

"Claire, we seem to have found Kamito!"

Part 4

--A few hours passed after that. Kamito returned to the stronghold of Team Scarlet.

At the skillfully concealed entrance in the forest, his comrades were already out to greet him, however--

"...Seriously, how much are you trying to worry us!?"

"N-Not like I was particularly worried or anything like that...!"

"Enough of this, Kamito-kun is always so reckless!"

"I-I'm sorry..."

Faced with the three young ladies' wrath, Kamito could not help but shrink back.

...It was only for a day, but clearly they were really worried.

Claire's ruby-like eyes were filled with teardrops--

"...Sob... Sob..."

...For some reason, she was crying.

"H-Hey, Claire!?"

Kamito frantically placed his hands on her shoulders--

"Idiot... Seriously, I was so worried... Wuaaaaaah!"

Thud thud.

Clenching her fists, she hammered against Kamito's chest.

"Claire... I'm sorry."

Faced with Claire acting like this, Kamito gently caressed her head.

"Wah... Sob... I-Idiot..."

"Because she was worrying about Kamito, she cried the whole night."

Rinslet whispered secretly by his earside.

"Is that so?"

Claire's face instantly turned burning red.

"L-Liar! I didn't cry!"

"Oh my, trying to deceive us is pointless."

"...~!"

"In any case, it's great that Claire is fine."

Smiling wryly, Kamito continued to caress her head.

"Y-Yes... All thanks to Kamito."

Her face red, Claire lowered her gaze.

Then as if resolving herself, she bit her lip hard.

"K-Kamito..."

Fiddling awkwardly with her fingers, her head bowed deeply--

"Umm... I-I have decided, from now on, I will be more hon--"

"...Ah, right. Wait a minute."

Suddenly, Kamito spoke.

"...Eh?"

Claire was completely shocked.

"No, before that, I have something I must report to everyone first."

"...?"

All the girls tilted their head in puzzlement. Kamito turned around and waved his hand at the trees behind him.

"Milla, you can come out now."

"Yes."

From the depths of the trees came a rustling sound--

A girl with dark brown hair, Milla, appeared.

"...Uh?"

Claire and the girls all exclaimed in surprise.

"...A pleasure to meet you all."

Milla stepped forward and politely bowed her head towards Claire and the rest.

"..." "..." "..." "..."

The young ladies fell silent.

Then--

"H-Hey, Kamito...?"

Claire's shoulders were trembling.

"...This really adorable child, who is she?"

The red twintails were standing straight up like burning pillars of fire.

"...H-Hey Claire? Why are you getting angry?"

"I-I am not angry. Completely, entirely not angry...!"

"Kamito, I can't believe you are this kind of man...!"

"...Seriously, what is going on!?"

"Could this be, a kidnapping!?"

Ellis, Rinslet and Fianna all cast icy-cold glares.

...Somehow, it felt like there was some kind of extremely embarrassing misunderstanding.

Fortunately, Milla was the one to clear things up.

"--I am Milla Bassett, the leader of the Rupture Division representing the Principality of Rossvale."

"Milla Bassett -- in that case, you were the one who proposed the alliance...?"

Met with Claire's inquiry, Milla nodded.

"Yes. Together with Kazehaya Kamito, we have exchanged oaths to establish an alliance."

"...Oaths?"

Milla's words made all the young ladies perk up their ears.

"I decided on my own to form the alliance... So, is there anything wrong with that?"

"N-No, that's fine. However..."

Claire began to pout.

"When elementalists exchange Oaths, I remember the ritual..."

"A kiss from both parties -- is necessary, right?"

Ellis and Rinslet instantly glared at Kamito.

"Hmm..."

"...You did it, Kamito-kun?"

"N-No, let me explain..."

The instant Kamito's gaze wavered, none of the girls failed to catch it.

"Kamito, please answer honestly!"

"Well yes, I did it, but just on the hand..."

"I can't believe you, to think even an innocent thirteen-year-old girl was not safe--"

Despite Kamito's stammering explanations, the young ladies' glares remained exceptionally cold.

Part 5

--In the end, Kamito had to spend quite a long time to clear up the misunderstanding.

(...Why do they have to be suspicious to this degree?)

Tilting his head in puzzlement, Kamito was lying on a futon in the tent.

His body's fatigue was still present, so he intended to nap until dinner.

As for Milla, he felt reassured to entrust her to Claire and the girls. The young ladies seemed quite happy at the arrival of a young girl, as if gaining a younger sister to be spoiled.

...Naturally, Milla seemed quite troubled on her side.

"...Kamito, are you still awake?"

Claire's voice was heard from the entrance.

"Yeah..."

Hearing Kamito respond, Claire entered lightly with bandages.

"What is it?"

"Time for new bandages. You're still wounded, right?"

"Ah yeah, sorry..."

Kamito extended his arm as Claire gently wrapped bandages over them.

"..."

Somehow the silence felt rather awkward.

Kamito wanted to say something, but could not find any words.

Perhaps because they had spent almost every day together until now. Being apart for a single day seemed to have disrupted their rhythm.

Furthermore, recalling the fact that Claire had cried for him out of worry, it felt rather embarrassing.

"Hey, Kamito..."

"Hmm?"

Claire was the first to speak up.

"About just now, I'm sorry... Umm, for s-suspecting you."

"Did you eat something strange?"

Her uncharacteristic attitude caused Kamito to frown.

"S-Shut up, I'm just apologizing honestly!"

"U-Understood...!"

...Yes, this was the normal Claire.

As she wrapped bandages around Kamito's arm, Claire spoke softly.

"Ah, ever since Rubia-neesama left, I've been alone."

Seeking power impatiently, she clashed constantly with upperclassmen and the Sylphid Knights.

At the time, she did not understand anything.

She regarded everyone around her as her enemies.

Needing no comrades. Trusting no one. Trying to become strong alone.

...That was truly what she believed in back then.

"But after meeting you... I feel I've changed."

"...Perhaps so, maybe."

"Whether Fianna, Ellis, or Rinslet... I consider them p-precious comrades."

Perhaps due to embarrassment, Claire's face was as red as a burning fire.

"Ah yes."

Kamito nodded.

"Umm, so, this... All this time, I've wanted to say this to Kamito..."

Claire's hand that was doing the bandaging paused as she stuttered.

Then she lifted her face as if greatly determined--

"Kamito, thank you..."

She spoke as if very shy.

"Claire..."

Kamito quietly gulped a mouthful of air--

"Same for me."

"Huh?"

"If I had never met Claire, I would never be standing upon this stage of the Blade Dance festival. Umm, completely unrelated to the team size restriction... Do you get what I mean?"

"...Yes. Alone, I don't think any of us could have stood here."

Finishing the bandaging, Claire stood up.

"Well then, rest well for today."

Then she made a beeline for the exit.

Looking at her back... Kamito spoke.

"Restia will probably come to target me. In the near future, perhaps I'll have to leave this place for a while."

Nepenthes Lore -- that monster would surely come together.

When the time came, Kamito had no confidence whether he would be able to protect Claire and the girls given his current state.

But Claire shook her head resolutely.

"When the time comes, we will face them. Together, *everyone* from Team Scarlet."

Part 6

For dinner that day, a small party was held to celebrate the alliance with the Rupture Division.

On the dinner table made from tree trunks, all sorts of delicious food were laid out.

Honey spread on bread. Cooked beans. Wild herb and mushroom salad. Laurenfrost style stew. River fish pie. The dessert menu was a sumptuous feast made from canned fruit.

"How amazing..."

Milla exclaimed with surprise.

"Please help yourself to the food, no need to be reserved."

"May I?"

"Of course. After all, Milla, you did help my slave."

Claire sliced a piece of fish pie for Milla.

Apparently they had become quite friendly while Kamito was sleeping. Sitting there side by side, they seemed like very close sisters.

As a side note, Claire had resumed her usual attitude towards Kamito.

"Claire, help me cut some of that pie please."

"Oh my, how conceited of you, to dare order around the Elstein family's daughter?"

...That was how things went.

"The main course is ready."

Rinslet brought a huge plate of roasted meat that was still sizzling.

She must have roasted an entire pig whole.

"Seriously, you really hunted a wild boar!?"

"Fu, of course it was yours truly, together with Fenrir."

Rinslet puffed out her chest with pride.

The tender and juicy roasted meat looked very delicious. Together with sliced ginger and garlic, a special sauce seasoned with spices, the rich aroma filled the table.

"Yes, the meat is really soft and tender. It is also perfectly cooked."

"Fufu, if you like, let's go hunt some more?"

"No, it doesn't really feel right to recklessly hunt wild animals in the sanctuary..."

Ridiculing with his half-narrowed eyes, Kamito shoved salad into his mouth.

Beneath the dinner table, Scarlet and Simorgh were also fighting for the roasted meat.

On the other hand, Fenrir sat very politely in the distance, though salivating if one were to look closely.

Looks like the Laurenfrost family were quite strict in educating their spirits.

"Hey Rinslet, it should be okay to give some of the meat to Fenrir, right?"

"That's not allowed normally... But we'll make an exception just for today."

Given the mistress' permission and a tossed portion of meat, Fenrir happily pounced.

"Kamito, I want to eat meat too."

"Ah yes, you love tasty food the most, Est."

"So happy, Kamito."

"Wait a minute, Kamito, you're spoiling Est too much."

"Fufu, I've dripped some sauce on my bosom. Kamito-kun, please help wipe it up."

Accompanied by a sudden voluptuous sensation, Kamito found his arm pressed against Fianna's sauce covered chest.

"Y-You can wipe it yourself, right?"

"If I do it myself, it won't be thorough enough... If you don't want to wipe it, you may lick instead~"

"Hey... G-Got it, then I'll wipe, okay?"

As his heart raced, Kamito reached out with his handkerchief towards the deep valley between her breasts.

"Mmm... The movements of Kamito-kun's fingers feel really perverted~"

"Fianna!?"

"Allow me to wipe, Your Highness the imperial princess!"

"Iyaaaah!"

Having made her way behind Fianna discreetly, Claire suddenly reached out and started rubbing Fianna's bosom.

"What are you doing!?"

"Kamito is my slave, okay, you're not allowed to order him around!"

"Hey, you are committing the crime of insolence against the imperial family!"

Ignoring the two girls fighting at the dinner table, Kamito reached towards the cooked beans.

"...Hmm, these cooked beans are quite tasty."

Despite its modest appearance, the soup had a rather delicate taste.

Hearing this comment, Ellis' ponytail jumped in elation.

"K-Kamito, I made that..."

"Ellis? Right, now that I think about it, the taste does feel like something you'd make."

"...Though compared to Rinslet's cooking, umm, it does feel a bit lacking in style."

Expressing her modesty, Ellis awkwardly fiddled with her fingers.

"No no, even though it looks simple in appearance, I'm sure it took a lot of effort to make this. After all, I do know how to cook more or less. I can feel the effort and feelings behind it."

"R-Really!? I-I hope you like it... I am glad."

Ellis seemed quite shy as she coiled the hair from her ponytail around her little finger again and again.

"Kamito, i-if you wish, let me feed you. Your wounds must still be affecting you."

"No, that's a bit embarrassing..."

"No need to be shy. So, say 'ah'--"

"A-Ahhhh..."

Seeing he had no choice, Kamito opened wide to accept the spoon.

"I-Is it good?'

"...Ah yes, very tasty."

"Ellis, you're stealing a march on us, so sly!"

"Please try my cooking too!"

Fianna and Rinslet reprimanded Ellis.

"D-Do not misunderstand! I simply noticed that Kamito's arm was still hurt so..."

"I-In that case, I'll feed him too!"

Sticking her fork into a piece of meat, Claire thrust it over.

"That's really hot, Claire, and you poked me in the face ! Ouch!"

"..."

Milla watched the dinner table commotion blankly.

"Milla, what's wrong?"

"I've never had a meal like this."

Asked by Kamito, Milla replied in monotone.

"Don't you eat together with everyone in your team, Milla?"

"No, because my companion knights all take care of me with great caution."

Milla quietly shook her head.

(Taken care of with great caution -- hmm?)

Rather than cherished, this meant something different.

As if trying not to break or harm something fragile -- and keeping their distance.

This thirteen-year-old girl had always lived a life of untouchable isolation.

Like an offering on a sacrificial altar--

"Milla, you should eat as much as you can. If you don't eat properly you won't grow up."

Claire placed her hand on Milla's head.

"That is so true. Well, it's a little late for Claire's chest though."

"Whose chest are you talking about!?"

Watching Claire and Rinslet quarrel--

Kamito did not fail to catch Milla's extremely faint smile.

Part 7

--Parting with her came so suddenly.

"Our training will end today."

"...Huh?"

The boy stood there in shock at the sudden announcement.

"Why... Why!? I -- still haven't killed you!"

"You have become strong. There is nothing more I can teach you."

The black-haired girl smiled calmly. Her dusk-colored eyes were filled with sorrow.

"...I hate this."

"Kamito?"

"I hate this! You have to stay by my side! Forever by my side--"

Halfway through, Kamito suddenly stopped his sentence.

"S-So, umm, I..."

Stuttering, his face went red.

"You're now able to make this kind of expression. Back when we first met, all you had was a stiff poker face."

The darkness spirit girl gently caressed the boy's head.

"You're almost my height now."

"...D-Don't toy with me!"

Kamito shook his head angrily.

Before he met her, the boy's feelings had never undergone such upheaval.

"The story's continuation--"

"...?"

"I still haven't heard the rest of that story."

He was referring to the bedtime stories she told.

The continuation of that bedtime story had somehow become the boy's greatest pleasure.

"...Sorry."

"Why, why are you apologizing--"

As if to seal the boy's mouth, the girl kissed him.

"...!"

The boy's eyes widened in surprise.

Separating her lips from him lightly, she smiled shyly.

"Your first kiss?"

"..."

The boy nodded in a daze... His mind completely blank, he could not think properly.

"--Remember this well, the kiss of our contract."

The girl's fingertips, gently caressing his cheek, dissipated into the air as particles of light--

"*Should there ever come a time in the future when I have changed so much that I am myself no longer--*"

--Kill me.

Part 8

"Ah, this is so invigorating..."

Beneath the starry sky, Kamito was enjoying a soak in an open air bath alone.

This was not a hot spring but a pool created by piling rocks in a ring and using a fire spirit to boil water for a bath. Since the water in the sanctuary carried fatigue recovery properties, soaking his wounds in the crystal clear water felt especially comfortable.

Under the moonlight, Kamito looked at the spirit seal on his left hand.

Blood was slightly seeping out from the crescent-shaped crest.

...Recently, I seem to keep dreaming about her.

Those were Kamito's memories from before he became the strongest blade dancer.

On that day, Restia was sealed away once again. Because she had taught the boy what he was not supposed to know -- human emotions.

After that, through the *re-education* efforts of the elders at the Instructional School, the boy lost his emotions once more -- however, his feeling of longing for her, that alone was never forgotten.

Then four years ago, on the day that the flame demonic deity attacked and destroyed the Instructional School, he took the ring where she was sealed and the two of them began their journey.

--Those short but wonderful days.

(Restia...)

As if trying to catch a hold of the night sky which reminded him of her beautiful black hair, Kamito reached out with his hand.

The spirit seal on his left hand was hurting.

(Summoning? Calling for me...)

Very soon, he would have to settle things with her--

That was what his intuition predicted.

Splash -- Suddenly, he heard a light noise in the water behind him.

"...!?"

Frantically turning around, he saw a tiny figure in the shadows of the rocks obscured by the steam.

"...Kamito?"

"Is that Milla?"

"Yes."

He could hear Milla's voice.

"This is the men's bath reserved for me. The women's bath is located over there by the cliff."

"I didn't know."

"Sorry. It's quite easy to mix up... Anyway, I'm getting out so just enjoy yourself here."

Kamito hastily prepared to leave--

"...Wait."

But Milla stopped him.

"I have something to say to you."

"...Here?"

"If it's here, the others won't come."

...I see. Indeed, Claire and the girls were probably not going to come to this men's bath.

(Something she doesn't want the others to hear--)

Kamito immersed himself in the bath again.

On the other side of the light mist, Milla appeared, wrapped in a white towel.

Her body was small and slender. As her moistened dark brown hair clung to her face, there was a sense of charm that did not seem to belong to a thirteen-year-old girl.

As she walked over to the side, Kamito shifted his gaze away as his heart began to race.

"...So, what did you want to tell me?"

"About my *eye*. I only want you to know."

Milla's amber left eye flashed in the night.

"This is the value of my existence. The reason I was raised as a tool."

"--The Demon Sealing Eye, right?"

"...You already... know?"

Milla exclaimed in surprise.

"No I didn't. But I could guess."

The demon sealing eye. This was a special eye that descendants from lineages of elementalists were born with in rare instances.

A type of extremely rare spirit crystal.

Due to numerous cases of demon sealing eyes with powerful spirits sealed inside of them, the possessors were regarded as dangerous in most situations and persecuted, either that or used as weapons by those in authority -- that was how things were.

In any case, this thirteen-year-old girl was saddled with a cruel and harsh fate.

The reason why Kamito knew about the demon sealing eye which was unknown to most people, was because there was another girl at the Instructional School who also possessed the same type of *eye*.

That girl had been used as a weapon and perished at an early age.

"When I was young, my parents feared this *eye* and sold me to the knights of the Principality of Rossvale, to be trained as a weapon needed to win the Blade Dance festival."

Milla gazed at Kamito expressionlessly.

"In order to control the sealed spirit with stability, anger, sorrow, joy -- all unnecessary emotions were deprived."

"...Crazy fellows. They exist everywhere."

Kamito groaned painfully. Recalling how his own emotions were killed off and the orphans at the Instructional School who were used and expended like tools--

(If I had never met Restia, my fate would have been the same as those guys...)

"...Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I -- deceived Kamito."

Milla uttered this sentence with great suffering.

"...?"

"Sealed within my Eye is the conquering army spirit ' The Crusaders' -- a tactical-class militarized spirit."

"A tactical class militarized spirit?"

Tactical class -- amongst militarized spirits, this was a type of spirit that was particularly difficult to control.

Other than for exceptional cases like Muir Alenstarl -- this was not the type of spirit that ordinary elementalists could control alone.

Controlling that type of spirit required specialized training as a team.

Kamito finally realized.

"I see. The Rupture Division also served as the team for controlling that militarized spirit."

"That's right. They were the team prepared for using the tool that is me. Only with the Rupture Division present can the demon sealing eye be operated."

In other words--

Milla by herself was unable to draw out the spirit's power, basically.

"Possessing a spirit with the holy attribute is true... But I have no way of using that power."

"...So by deception, you mean this."

Allying with Milla who employed a holy spirit in order to facilitate battle against Nepenthes Lore--

This was the benefit she brought up during negotiations for the alliance. However, if that spirit could not be used, then Kamito and his team's strategy had to be altered fundamentally.

"I apologize. I must prevail in this Blade Dance no matter what. Because, being raised as a tool, that is my mission."

Despite the Rupture Division's collapse and nearly losing everything, she still struggled for survival.

Because Milla Bassett's value in living only lay in that.

"That's okay. That's your achievement after all."

Kamito gently placed his hand on Milla's head.

"...Kamito?"

"This alliance is the victory you won with your own hands, Milla. Be proud of yourself."

Gently, he caressed her dark brown hair.

"...Milla, have you heard of the Instructional School?"

Suddenly, Kamito brought up such a topic.

"...Existing somewhere in the Ordesia Empire, a secret organization for raising assassins."

"Yeah. That's where I came from."

"...!?"

Milla's eyes widened with surprise.

"I am the same as you, Milla. Raised as a tool for murder from childhood."

"However, you... Don't look like it."

"Because there was a girl who helped me recover a human's heart."

Kamito gently withdrew his hand from Milla's head.

"..."

Milla hung her head... As if pondering something.

Soon after, she slowly looked up--

"Last night's story."

"Hmm?"

"The continuation of last night's story, I want to hear it."

"Ah sure..."

Kamito recalled and nodded.

It was the fairy tale he had heard from Restia when he was young. In this open air bath where one could hear the sound of the river flowing, Kamito continued the story he told the previous night.

"...Fufu."

Was something really funny? Milla once again was desperately suppressing laughter.

...Oh well, as long as she's happy.

"You really are much cuter when you're smiling."

"W-What are you talking about..."

Kamito's half-joking comment made Milla blush slightly.

"Since you are able to laugh like this, you are no longer just a tool."

Assuredly, lost things had to be taken back.

As long as she had someone beside her the way Restia was to Kamito.

Gazing up at the night sky concealed by darkness, Kamito muttered to himself.

(...Restia, even now, I'm still waiting for you to continue that bedtime story.)

At this very moment -- a sharp pain was felt in his left hand's spirit seal.

Intense pain like scorching fire, it made Kamito's face distorted.

"...Kamito?"

"--That person has arrived."

Part 9

In the quiet forest, the black-winged angel appeared--

"What a secure stronghold your team has built here. As expected of Her Highness the Imperial Princess, former heiress to the throne."

Restia shrugged and pouted her adorable lips.

Probably as a counter against those with the attribute of darkness, there were apparently multiple holy barriers .

To her it was like the gates of hell.

However--

"I'm very sorry, but I shall have to break through by force."

As Restia giggled, a massive figure appeared from the depths of the forest.

Emanating an aura of ominous disaster from all over, the black knight -- Nepenthes Lore.

Having absorbed divine power from numerous elementalists to become a complete monster, there stood the materialization of the Demon King's will.

"Well then, let's begin the blade dance, Kamito..."

With a great roar, Nepenthes Lore tore apart the barrier using claw-like gauntlets.

Chapter 8 - The Demon Sword Revived

Part 1

The spirits inhabiting the forest began to cause a noisy commotion as soon as they sensed the intruder's presence.

"...Kamito?"

"--That person arrived."

Kamito answered briefly as Milla frowned.

As if tempting Kamito, the spirit seal on his left hand was throbbing.

The identity of the visitor -- there was no need for deductions.

"Milla, do me a favor and go to where Claire and the rest are."

Swiftly putting on his uniform, Kamito picked up the sleeping Demon Slayer.

"What about you, Kamito?"

"Her only target is me. I have to stop them here."

"You are fighting Nepenthes Lore by yourself?"

"Hurry and go--"

Milla nodded and ran towards the campsite.

Watching her leave--

"...This thing is truly an extraordinary monster."

Kamito wiped the cold sweat from his forehead.

He could sense the disastrous aura approaching from the depths of the forest.

She too, surely knew Kamito was located here.

Immediately -- a roar that seemed to shake the earth was heard.

(--It's here!)

Kamito infused the Demon Slayer with divine power.

Shining brightly with silver-white luster, Terminus Est banished the darkness of the night.

Tearing away the wall of trees in the way--

The monster appeared before Kamito.

The elementalist clad completely in jet black armor -- Nepenthes Lore.

As well as--

"I'm so glad, Kamito. You've been waiting for me all alone?"

Those beautiful dusk-colored eyes. Her dark dress and gorgeous black hair fluttered in the wind.

Unfortunately, she had not changed at all -- she still maintained the same appearance as back then, back when their hearts were one.

Despite the fact that Kamito himself had changed so much.

"Restia..."

Kamito forgot everything in an instant, mesmerized by her beautiful appearance.

If he held out his hand now, would her past self return ? -- Such foolish wishes crossed his mind.

"Nepenthes Lore is the final opponent I've prepared for you."

She smiled lightly.

"Very well then, blade dance to your heart's content, Kamito."

"...!"

Kamito wielded the Demon Slayer with both hands.

...The way she was now, it was impossible to reach her with words.

Only through a blade dance could her inner heart be touched.

"From distant lands I have brought forth endless darkness, to bestow upon you eternal punishment--"

Restia's adorable lips chanted spirit language.

Her figure disappeared as if melting into the darkness--

Instantly, a jet black demon sword appeared in the hand of Nepenthes Lore.

It was a great sword reminiscent of burning black flames of disaster. Although there were minute differences, it was indeed the same weapon that Kamito wielded three years ago.

The Vorpal Sword -- amongst darkness elemental waffen, it was indisputably the demon sword of the strongest class.

However, Kamito's current elemental waffe was no pushover either. Despite being incomplete, Est's rank as a spirit should be no inferior to Restia in any significant amount.

"--Let's go, Est!"

The Demon Slayer's blade shone with silver-white brilliance.

Part 2

In the forest where the spirits were in a clamor, Milla ran desperately.

Her destination was the center of the stronghold where Claire and the girls were located. Naturally, the girls had already noticed the latest developments--

Suddenly, Milla discovered a fiery hell cat running from the depths of the forest.

She recalled its name was Scarlet, Claire's contracted spirit.

"...Milla!"

As Milla stopped, she heard a voice from that direction .

Appearing from the darkness were the three girls, Claire, Ellis and Rinslet. They were all wielding their elemental waffen, ready for battle.

"--Where's Kamito?"

As her shoulders heaved with her breathing, Claire asked with a face full of concern.

"He is currently fighting alone against Nepenthes Lore whom the darkness spirit brought."

"...What did you say!?"

Claire and the girls exchanged glances.

"Hurry and tell us where. We must fight together."

"...Fight together?"

Milla frowned... What was she saying?

"Yes. That is not an enemy Kamito can handle alone."

"If you don't hurry, Kamito-san will be taken out!"

Ellis and Rinslet pressed impatiently.

"But..."

These girls were definitely excellent elementalists.

However, they were surely unable to help Kamito. In fact, they were more likely to become a burden.

That Nepenthes Lore was truly a monster. By now, it had probably reached an even higher level of power compared to when the Rupture Division was annihilated.

The only one able to fight it head on was Kazehaya Kamito.

No, even Kamito might not win. Precisely because he understood the situation well, that was why he asked Milla to hurry to Claire and the other girls.

To help his important comrades escape.

Milla could sympathize with Kamito's feelings.

"--You girls, cannot go there."

"...? Why?"

Claire frowned with surprise as Ellis and Rinslet looked at each other.

"Kamito chose to fight alone for the sake of protecting you. Therefore, you cannot go."

"Did Kamito say that?"

"...Huh?"

"Did Kamito say *he will fight alone*?"

Claire stared straight into Milla's face.

Rather than scolding, she was speaking with an inexplicable sense of authority.

"Umm... But..."

Claire gently placed her hand on the confused Milla's head--

"No matter what, we have to go."

Forcefully, she declared.

"We are a team, and that guy -- is our precious comrade."

Ellis and Rinslet nodded silently.

"..."

Milla felt something rouse within her heart.

...An unidentified emotion.

Only, it felt scorching hot--

--At that moment, jet black lightning exploded in the distance.

"...!?"

Part 3

"Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Kamito leaped from the ground. Holding the sacred sword in both hands, he swung it down on the black knight's head.

Although this sacred sword, which had once destroyed the Demon King at the hands of the Sacred Queen, was only at one tenth of its original power, it was still sufficient to shatter the dragon knight Leonora's Dragon Slayer.

Nevertheless, the black knight's massive body turned and lightly blocked the attack using the dark demon sword.

Sparks scattered in the dark night. Pushed back by the receiving stroke, Kamito flew through the air.

(This thing has become much stronger since the last battle...!)

Smacking his lips as he landed, Kamito lowered his stance and attacked once again.

He was well aware of the severe drawbacks when fighting enemies of a superior physical build. In a direct clash of swords, Kamito, with his weaker arm strength, would be obviously disadvantaged.

(In that case, I must take advantage of the opponent's openings--)

Hence Kamito stepped forward.

Nepenthes Lore swept the jet black demon sword sideways--

In that instant, jet black lighting erupted from the demon sword's blade.

"...!?"

At the last moment, Kamito jumped sideways to evade . The innumerable lightning strikes released from the blade blasted a massive crater in the ground.

"...Even that can be used!?"

Kamito could not help but cry out.

Vorpal Blast -- that was the move that had filled numerous elementalists with fear three years ago.

It was the demon sword technique that Kamito had used to dominate and win the Blade Dance festival in the past as the strongest blade dancer.

Being devoured by the lighting meant instant death without question.

Nimbly dodging the storm of jet black lightning strikes , Kamito sought openings to approach Nepenthes Lore.

The clashing of the demon and sacred swords resulted in a continuous shower of sparks.

The Demon Slayer and the Vorpal Sword were equal in power.

Kamito swung his sword repeatedly to produce a storm of attacks, giving his opponent no opportunity to release lightning.

But he was unable to overwhelm his opponent. Nepenthes Lore displayed sword skills rivaling Kamito's. Furthermore, unlike Kamito, the black knight possessed nearly limitless divine power.

The only possible advantage was--

(...That guy is not Restia's true master through a proper contract.)

Even as the strongest demon sword, the Vorpal Sword, Restia was simply imitating the sword's appearance by her own will.

Consequently, the sword was not infused with the elementalist's own will.

Compared to an elemental waffe -- the weapon materialized by the unification of the contractor and the spirit's wills, the difference was paramount.

"You bastard--"

Kamito gripped the Demon Slayer tightly.

Entrusting complete faith in the spirit known as Est, he infused maximum divine power into the elemental waffe .

The sacred sword gave off dazzling brilliance and completely illuminated the darkness of the night.

"You can never wield Restia the same way as me!"

Kamito's strike swept the demon sword aside.

With an acute noise of metallic impact, Nepenthes Lore's body was sent off balance for the first time.

To prevent Kamito from following up the attack, Nepenthes Lore unleashed the Vorpal Blast.

Jet black lightning erupted from the blade of the demon sword.

--However, this was exactly what Kamito was waiting for.

The Vorpal Blast was not a pure sword skill but a type of spirit magic using the demon sword as a medium. Even though it did not require an incantation, activation of the technique still caused a brief momentary delay.

Seizing this opportunity, Kamito accelerated.

The lightning exploded before his eyes but Kamito did not falter. So long as he read the trajectory, Terminus Est's power was sufficient to deflect the lightning.

As a silver-white flash streaked through the air, the jet black lightning instantly dissipated.

"Ohhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Kamito did not stop. Raising the extended sacred sword, he invaded Nepenthes Lore's personal space like a tornado, chopping down at the massive body with his full strength.

The strike of the Demon Slayer shattered the black knight's helmet--

Engulfed by the light of Terminus Est, the jet black fragments vanished.

A terrifying roar pierced Kamito's ears.

Those eye sockets held glaring gazes of intense red light that seemed to penetrate Kamito.

"...!?"

Kamito widened his eyes in surprise.

He was immensely shocked by the sight before his eyes.

Exposed from the shattered armor--

That thing was not human.

Enveloped in black mist, that appearance was like a pitch black skeleton.

Amidst those eye sockets of infinite darkness, red eyes flashed with the light of disaster.

"This thing is... What the heck...?"

Kamito had known from the start that Nepenthes Lore was no ordinary elementalist.

However, this *thing* before him--

"--That's right, this is no human."

The one who answered was Restia, back in human form as a girl.

"--Awakened through forbidden magic, the Demon King's successor. Ren Ashdoll's will."

"...Ren Ashdoll?"

Kamito had heard that name many times before.

This was the name of the darkness elemental lord, reportedly vanquished during distant ancient times, whose existence itself was in doubt.

"Restia... You, what on earth..."

"That is all you can be told at this point."

Restia smiled tenderly.

As the light of disaster shone from Nepenthes Lore's eye sockets, roars shook the atmosphere.

The pressure Kamito felt on his entire body was completely different from earlier.

"...If my enemy is not human, then there's no need for me to hold back at all."

Kamito readied the Demon Slayer in a stance once more.

"I like that expression of yours. It reminds me of those times in the past."

"The way I am now, is different from the me you knew back then."

Kamito shook his head.

"Neither the strongest blade dancer from three years ago, nor the assassin from the Instructional School. Instead, I am now a member of Areishia Spirit Academy's Team Scarlet, Kazehaya Kamito!"

"That's right. You are much weaker than back then."

"So what?"

Kamito shrugged.

"Indeed I have weakened. If my past self from three years ago stood here -- me and Restia, even against this formidable Nepenthes Lore, I would feel no threat at all."

"Definitely. The one who knows best how powerful you are... Is me."

"However, perhaps you might not believe this--"

Kamito smiled fearlessly.

"From that Academy, I have obtained power surpassing myself three years ago."

"...? What did you just say?"

"Didn't you hear me? From the Academy, I have obtained power even greater than before."

Restia's beautiful face--

Began to show subtle signs of anxiety.

Such an expression was truly rare for her.

"...What a tasteless joke. Though surprisingly, your conceit and self-confidence is identical to when you were young."

Turning towards Nepenthes Lore, she lightly lifted her hand--

"This unfounded self-confidence of yours shall be utterly crushed by me."

Black flashing light erupted from her fingertips.

"Although she said the seal could not be released yet, let me treat you to a special sight. This is Nepenthes Lore's true power--"

"...!?"

Nepenthes Lore's massive body shook.

The jet black armor dissipated into black mist and melted into the darkness of the night--

(...What the heck is this!?)

Kamito gazed with full attention--

From the vanished armor, thick viscous darkness oozed out.

Squirming, shapeless darkness. Or rather, that *thing* was barely maintaining a human's form.

The repulsive skeleton emitted a bright red gaze as strange cursing laments leaked out of its mouth.

Restia's adorable lips twisted themselves slightly.

"Rather than protecting Nepenthes Lore, that armor acted as a seal to prevent its dark will from going berserk ."

Restia's figure disappeared into the darkness and took on the demon sword's form once more.

The skeleton's skull seemed to be trembling with delight from being released, exhaling pitch black breath.

"This looks really bad..."

Kamito licked his lips and groaned... His fingertips trembling slightly.

A true monster -- compared to his opponent just now, this was a completely different being.

Kamito gripped his partner tightly, the sacred sword.

"--Est, I'm relying on you. Please lend me your power a little longer."

Part 4

Hearing the sounds of blades clashing in the distance, Milla Bassett bit her lip hard.

Claire and the girls were moving towards Kamito's location.

(I...)

--No, I have no place to feel like I am in a dilemma.

Unable to use a contracted spirit, she would only be a liability.

(I, have no value anymore...)

Lightly, she touched her amber left eye -- the Demon Sealing Eye.

The icy cold sensation felt exactly like her heart right now.

The value as a vessel for a powerful tactical class spirit.

This was the entirety of her meaning in life.

(But, Kamito...)

Caressing her head, she recalled the warmth from that hand of his.

Hearing that he grew up in that Instructional School, just like herself -- no, surely he must have suffered far harsher training beyond what she had experienced.

Even so, he was still able to smile in that manner--

And believe in those girls, his comrades, to such an extent.

(He said, I am not a tool...)

Her emotions which had been trained to remain calm and unwavering, were starting to enter a state of turmoil.

(I wish, to become that person's strength...!)

Tears fell from Milla's eyes.

However, she was powerless in her current state.

...How regrettable.

At this time, running footsteps could be heard in the forest.

"...Fianna?"

Milla looked up.

Unsuited to combat, she should be hiding herself in the center of the stronghold instead, right -- ?

Fianna ran over as soon as she found Milla.

Probably because she was not in great physical shape, she was panting out of breath.

"I never expected the enemy to break through from the front like that. I've spent a lot of time assessing the damage and repairing the barrier. Although the barrier's overall functions have been recovered somewhat, the internal leylines have been messed up pretty badly..."

Apparently she had been busy repairing the damaged barrier. Ordinarily, fixing the barrier in such short time was not possible--

(...Speaking of which, she was originally a princess maiden and candidate for Queen.)

Purely in barrier construction, even amongst the other high level elementalists gathered at the Blade Dance festival, Fianna was likely unparalleled.

(...Barrier?)

Suddenly, a thought flashed across Milla's mind.

Even so, she still had a doubt -- why was Fianna still here?

"...You, where are you going?"

Seeing Fianna still out of breath, Milla asked.

"...? Isn't it obvious? Of course I'm going to assist Kamito-kun."

Fianna replied with an incredulous expression. Surprisingly, there was not the slightest hesitation in her eyes.

"After all, my knight spirit is better matched against a darkness spirit in a fight."

...That was besides the point. No matter how powerful a spirit she was contracted to, without undergoing any combat training, she would surely become a target.

"Why..."

"Eh?"

"Why, you girls..."

Milla could not comprehend their actions. Given Team Scarlet's combat potential, there was no way they could defeat Nepenthes Lore.

Clearly they did not fail to understand that--

Faced with Milla's perplexed expression, Fianna went " fufu" and smiled.

"Because we place our faith in Kamito-kun -- Therefore , *Kamito-kun will surely trust in us*."

"...!"

Milla's eyes widened suddenly.

...Kamito also believed in them?

Supposing, what if Kamito was not fighting for the sake of allowing the girls to escape--

(...Instead, he is aiming for victory together?)

Believing in his comrades, Kamito asked Milla to go to Claire and the rest.

However, she had interpreted his words as telling them to escape...!?

"Well, also..."

Fianna blushed shyly.

"Girls... As long as it's for the one they l-love, girls can do anything."

In a tiny whisper, barely audible, that was what she said.

"...?"

"You'll understand when you grow up."

Fianna shyly turned her blushing face away.

Seeing the imperial princess acting this way--

A certain notion surfaced in Milla's mind.

(That's right, given Fianna who is capable of constructing this sort of barrier...)

Perhaps an attempt might be successful after all...!

"Well then, I have to go--"

"--Wait."

Milla reached out and grabbed Fianna tightly from behind just as she was about to start running again.

"What is it?"

"This stronghold, is it currently under your control?"

"...? Yes. Although the damage is obvious, the barrier and the leylines are under my control."

Looking up at Fianna who was tilting her head in puzzlement, Milla spoke.

"I have an idea I'd like to try. I hope to obtain your assistance."

...Who knew if it would work. However, it was worth a try.

Milla lightly touched her Demon Sealing Eye on her left with her fingertip.

(If it fails -- even if it succeeds, I will lose my value.)

It would be an act that rejected the life she had lived up until now.

Even so -- if she did nothing at this juncture, she would surely regret it.

That was what she thought.

As if a scorching/burning hot idea suddenly exploded in her heart for the first time in her life--

Milla Bassett cried out.

"--Please. Take me to the heart of the stronghold!"

Part 5

--As the mud-like darkness dripped down upon the ground, Nepenthes Lore roared.

Then the black knight pulled out the Vorpal Sword embedded vertically in the ground.

Tightly gripping the Demon Slayer as it shone with silver-white brilliance, Kamito began to charge.

Kicking the soles of his boots against the ground to gain speed -- Kamito closed in instantly.

(A sustained battle would be disadvantageous for me. Victory must be decided in the next strike...!)

But just as he stepped on the black mud stretching across the ground, in that very instant--

"--What!?"

An intensely draining sensation attacked his entire body, and Terminus Est's shining brightness suddenly disappeared.

(...As soon as this darkness touched, my power gets stolen!?)

The viscous darkness entangled his foot. Kamito smacked his lips and jumped.

Numerous dark tentacles sprouted from the ground to pursue Kamito as he jumped. Infusing divine power into Terminus Est which had lost its brightness, Kamito severed all the incoming tentacles.

Nepenthes Lore roared with laughter as if greatly delighted.

"...This monster, getting so excited from being freed!"

There was little leisure for further ridiculing the opponent. The bottomless ooze dripping from Nepenthes Lore's body was rapidly eroding the ground surface.

"Is this all the divine power absorbed from the elementalists so far...?"

Dodging the dark tentacles extending from the ground , Kamito waited for his chance.

Vorpal Blast was released from the dark demon sword in Nepenthes Lore's hand.

"...!?"

A dark thunderstrike that streaked across the ground in a straight line.

Kamito barely dodged to find a large patch of forest behind him annihilated without a trace.

This surprising firepower far surpassed the level displayed back when Nepenthes Lore was sealed in the armor.

Various spirits hidden in the forest were instantly destroyed, producing particles of light. Fleeing spirits were also captured and devoured by the dark tentacles sprouting from the ground.

"...Est!"

Kamito brushed away black mud and jumped, infusing the Demon Slayer with divine power.

Using the dazzling sacred sword, he swung down at the demon sword of darkness -- !

"Ohhhhhhhhhhh!"

As if responding to Kamito's thoughts, Terminus Est's brightness intensified.

However.

Clang -- suddenly there was a minute metallic noise.

In the ensuing intense explosion of sparks, Kamito's ears caught the sound of a blade cracking.

(...Could it be possible, Est broke!?)

To this point, the Demon Slayer had vanquished numerous formidable foes.

For the very first time, Kamito experienced disadvantage in a frontal clash of blades.

Terminus Est was in no way inferior to Restia's demon sword.

But persisted use of an excessively powerful elemental waffe was depleting Kamito's divine power.

"...Tsk, I beg you Est, please endure a little while longer!"

Yelling at the same time, Kamito forced divine power into the sacred sword he gripped tightly.

Light and darkness were in stalemate once more. Sparks exploded from where the blades met.

Suddenly, Kamito felt a sharp pain from the spirit seal on his left hand.

--It's futile. In your current state, you cannot defeat Nepenthes Lore.

Restia's voice resounded in his mind directly.

She was speaking directly to Kamito's mind through the spirit seal.

--Awaken, Kamito. Show me your true power.

(...My true power?)

--Yes. Powerful enough to kill *them*, the true power of the Demon King.

(...With that power, will I be able to protect my comrades?)

Kamito asked in his heart as he infused divine power into the shining sacred sword--

(...*Can it realize your Wish from three years ago, the one that was not realized?*)

--It will. Furthermore, if you don't awaken now, you'll die.

"...Really?"

Kamito quietly closed his eyes.

The Demon King's power lying dormant in Kamito's body. Kamito still had no idea what she was talking about, but it seemed like he would be able to protect his comrades if he took possession of that power.

Kamito in his current state desperately wished to reach out for that power.

However--

"...I'm sorry. I'm not interested in that sort of unknown power."

As Kamito smiled fearlessly, he could feel Restia's dumbfounded surprise.

"Didn't I mention it just now? I have obtained new power."

...Very soon. That power was about to arrive.

"--Such as her, this sword spirit Est."

The precious partner who broke free from the shadow of tragedy and returned to Kamito's side.

As well as--

Kamito kicked at Nepenthes Lore's shoulder and leaped back.

The demon sword of darkness swung down.

Together with black mud, it approached Kamito forcefully--

In that very instant, a crimson slash lit the dark night on fire.

"--Turn into charcoal!"

As soon as they made contact with the chaotic flurry of flames, the dark tentacles disappeared without trace.

A burning wall of a flame illuminated the girl's figure a bright fiery red.

Those eyes of rubies shone with unyielding spirit. Her red twintails fluttered in the wind.

"--I've been waiting for you, Claire!"

Kamito made a thumbs up sign at the hell cat girl, standing proudly with Flametongue wielded in her hand .

"Kamito, I am here as well!"

"Kamito-san, me too!"

Ellis, armed with Ray Hawk, and Rinslet with Magic Bow of Ice also arrived.

"Don't forget, this Blade Dance festival is a team fight."

Kamito believed in his teammates whom, at the same time, also believed in him.

"--This is the power I did not have three years ago, Restia."

The four teammates swiftly entered into formation and faced off against the roaring Nepenthes Lore.

Chapter 9 - All-Out War

Part 1

Amidst intensely burning flames, Team Scarlet's blade dance was starting.

With a furious howl, Nepenthes Lore released dark tentacles in all directions.

"Freezing fangs of ice, go forth and pierce -- Freezing Arrow!"

However, Rinslet's freezing arrows froze the countless tentacles, turning them into ice blocks that shattered upon falling to the ground.

"Leave those tentacles to me!"

"Yeah, I'll rely on you for support, Rinslet!"

Kamito readied his sword in a stance and walked side by side with Ellis.

"I will handle frontline defenses while you attack, Kamito."

"Got it."

Her ponytail was blowing haphazardly in the wind. Those stern brown eyes of hers, adorned by her eyebrows, glared straight at the enemy before them.

Kamito had fought in unison with Ellis numerous times on missions of the Sylphid Knights. She was a teammate he could entrust to protect his back with great assurance.

With Ellis and Kamito as the vanguard, Rinslet providing long range support fire, Claire commanded the team while she engaged in guerilla and disruption tactics. This was Team Scarlet's basic tactical formation.

--This is what you meant by the power you have obtained?

Restia's impatient voice resounded in Kamito's mind.

--How disappointing. Clearly no matter how many more people you gather, none of them can even hold a candle to you alone.

(--Well then, let's see, shall we?)

Kamito declared to her in his heart.

Then he whispered to Ellis beside him.

"Don't touch that thing's demon sword. Most spirits cannot withstand it. The only one who can clash blades directly is my Est."

"Understood."

Ellis nodded.

"Also, beware of that black mud. As soon as you touch it, your divine power will be stolen."

"What?"

Ellis' brown eyes stared wide.

The dark mud was continuing to spread. It had already invaded the majority of the ground. As a result, they could not even approach the immediate surroundings of Nepenthes Lore.

"Ellis, can you open up a path?"

"Yes, leave it to me."

Ellis agreed and readied Ray Hawk in a horizontal stance.

Rumbling, tempestuous magical wind gathered a the tip of the spear -- then she softly chanted the words of release.

"Evil winds -- Go and rampage!"

Instantly, innumerable blades of wind sliced the ground, blowing the mud of darkness away.

While the blades of wind were released, Kamito sprinted like wind across the torn open ground.

Nepenthes Lore's repulsive gaze seemed to pierce Kamito.

Such astounding killing intent, enough to make an average person lose consciousness, yet Kamito endured it head on.

He could not back down from fear now. Even when the opponent was a terrifying monster--

(...After all, the young ladies are watching me!)

The onslaught of raging blades of wind approached, but Nepenthes Lore easily deflected them with a flash of the demon sword of darkness.

(--Now is the moment!)

The instant before the mud of darkness invaded the ground again after being blown away...

Kamito leaped.

Maintaining his forward leaning posture, he closed in instantly, riding upon the roaring wind. These coordinated tactics were learned through training together with Ellis.

"Ohhhhhhhhhhhh!"

As the Demon Slayer flashed with silver-white brilliance, Kamito chopped straight down.

The astounding shockwave shook the atmosphere.

Wielding the demon sword of darkness, Nepenthes Lore blocked this full powered attack.

However, Kamito's movements did not end there. Using the sword hilt as a pivot, he changed postures in midair, taking advantage of the deflection of Nepenthes Lore's blade to land a solid slash on the shoulder.

With a splatter of viscous dark matter, Nepenthes Lore's massive body shook slightly.

Landing on the ground, Kamito mercilessly followed up on his attack.

Chopping, thrusting, sweeping -- the sword flashed in the dark night.

A spectacular flowing blade dance worthy of the strongest blade dancer, Ren Ashbell, at peak performance.

The everchanging motions of Kamito's movements overwhelmed Nepenthes Lore's reaction speed.

Widening its great gaping jaws, Nepenthes Lore let loose a roar of pain.

Corrupted divine power spewed out in vast amounts, tainting the surrounding ground instantly.

"...!?"

Kamito smacked his lips in midair.

As soon as he landed on the mud, his divine power would be immediately robbed from him.

But just before he touched the ground--

"--May your pure white sighs give form to eternal frozen ice -- Frost Prison!"

A massive freezing arrow flew like a shooting star and struck the ground beneath Kamito's feet.

Instantly, rainbow-colored magical ice spread and froze the mud of darkness.

Kamito's boot soles landed on the magical ice. Then with the slimmest of margins, he dodged the sweeping demon sword of darkness using a sliding motion.

"Thanks for your great help. Great job, Rinslet!"

"Hmph, naturally!"

Rinslet proudly swept her hand through her hair.

Kamito jumped from the ice and attacked Nepenthes Lore with godlike speed in a triple combo.

"--Still not enough!"

Double, then triple -- a five-hit combo delivered with thrusts mixed in.

Taking advantage of openings in the demon sword of darkness, Kamito attacked in rapid succession as if performing a dance.

As numerous dark tentacles attacked from behind, they were all struck down by Claire's Flametongue.

Kamito's skill with the sword was completely dominating.

Nevertheless, his face displayed anxiety.

(--This won't end if this continues!)

Like a mass of shape-shifting darkness, Nepenthes Lore's body immediately regenerated as soon as it was damaged.

(Furthermore, my divine power is reaching its limits--)

Terminus Est's brilliance was weakening as it flashed in the dark.

Even as an elemental waffe of the strongest class, her true worth could not produce effect without the contractor's infused divine power.

In a moment of distraction, Kamito's sword was deflected by the demon sword of darkness.

"...!?"

Just as Kamito was sent off balance--

The tip of the demon sword released the Vorpal Blast --

"--Kamito!"

With a crimson slash, Flametongue coiled around Nepenthes Lore's arm.

With the trajectory of the sword's fall diverted slightly, the jet black lightning flew past Kamito.

The resulting lightning strike vaporized a fan-shaped segment of the forest.

"--That was really close... Yah!"

Claire found herself flying through the air. Nepenthes Lore had grabbed Flametongue and flung sideways in a horizontal sweeping motion.

"Claire!"

Kamito was about to hurry over--

But suddenly halted his steps.

Without him noticing, the viscous darkness was approaching before him.

The repulsive darkness that stole divine power as soon as contact was made, was spreading with astounding speed.

This massive amount did not come simply from the elementalists Nepenthes Lore stole divine power from.

Rather, the monster had amplified its power after making contact with the leylines flowing in the ground.

Kamito's surroundings had turned into a swamp of darkness. As things stood, Kamito's foothold would soon be engulfed as well.

(Even the stronghold...)

Kamito gnashed his teeth.

Crushing despair loomed over him as if materialized tangibly.

Terminus Est's brightness had weakened greatly.

In his current state, Kamito did not even have the strength to slash apart the darkness and break through by force.

--This is the end, Kamito. You cannot defeat this sort of power.

As the spirit seal on his left hand stung with pain, Kamito heard the transmission of Restia's sweet and beautiful voice.

(I...!)

The approaching darkness surrounded Kamito.

"Kamito!"

"Kamito-san!"

Ellis and Rinslet screamed.

Completely cut off from any escape route, Kamito's feet were just about to make contact with the darkness--

"Damn it...!"

At this moment--

Suddenly, dazzling brightness erupted from the ground beneath.

"...What!?"

The ground that was covered by the viscous darkness began to rumble and heave as if boiling. Down below, numerous shining magic circles appeared one after another -- !

The darkness cornering Kamito from all sides receded like a tide.

"What on earth happened...?"

"--Flowing through the leylines of the stronghold, holy power is pouring out nonstop!"

Claire yelled.

"Leylines... Then it's Fianna?"

The stronghold constructed by Fianna was specially designed to be able to adjust the flow of leylines from the central hub, thereby allowing support effects to be delivered from the blessing of spirits.

But this overwhelming power carrying the holy attribute, what was supplying it--

"Could it be...!?"

Part 2

"...How amazing. Is this the power of the spirit sealed in your eye?"

"No, this is simply the release of a fraction of its power ..."

The location was the central hub which controlled the leylines.

Kneeling before the tiny shrine established before a sacred tree, Milla shook her head.

Her expression was distorted from pain while her forehead sweated profusely.

"Only a fraction..."

Fianna murmured with a terrified expression.

As an outstanding princess maiden, she could keenly sense the spirit's power through her skin.

The tactical class militarized spirit -- Crusaders. The spirit summoned by Milla Bassett was definitely a norm-defying existence.

"Milla, what do you see?"

As Milla knelt with her eyes closed, Fianna asked.

Currently, Fianna had transferred the stronghold's control to Milla.

This was for the purpose of using the stronghold's leylines to release the power of the spirit residing in her Demon Sealing Eye.

Once the Demon Sealing Eye's power was connected to the stronghold, perhaps the powerful tactical-class militarized spirit's power could be drawn out -- that was what Milla considered.

However, the transfer of a stronghold's control rights was normally not possible. The only reason why the connection succeeded was due to the merits of the former Queen candidate, Fianna.

"--There are four flashing lights. They are about to be devoured by the repulsive darkness."

"It must be Kamito-kun and the rest. Concentrate your consciousness there."

"Yes..."

Milla nodded as she pressed her hand against the amber left eye that was dripping blood.

The control of the multiple complicated barriers comprising a stronghold was a massive burden both physically and mentally. Furthermore, Milla was not a princess maiden trained at the Divine Ritual Institute. Even with Fianna's support, simply enduring the intense pain from the backlash was consuming all of Milla's efforts.

"Ah... Guh... Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

"Milla, don't overdo it!"

"...No prob... lem... Guh..."

Milla's tiny hand gave off the light of blue-white lightning.

Transmitting a militarized spirit's power through leylines was already an outrageous notion. If this continued, her Demon Sealing Eye was at risk of damage.

"...Guh... N-Noble-minded knights of the sacred king--
"

Accompanying the reverse current of divine power, intense pain tormented the young girl's body.

But paying it no heed, Milla released the power of the spirit sealed within the Eye.

"--Your sword... Exists to vanquish the strong and protect the weak--"

--Even if it breaks, I don't mind.

(Only at this moment, so long as Kamito is protected...)

With a crisp shattering sound, a crack appeared on Milla's left eye.

"Gather upon my battlefield, to swing that sword without reservation -- Crusaders!"

Then Milla hoarsely expelled this spirit releasing incantation from her throat.

Part 3

"...This is!?"

The sight before him made Kamito widen his eyes in surprise.

Pure and serene brightness was emitted from numerous magic circles extending all across the ground.

The power released from the leylines, carrying the holy attribute, was purifying the filthy darkness.

No, not only that.

From the innumerable magic circles, something was coming out--

Namely, innumerable swords. Innumerable spears. Innumerable shields.

An army composed of a great number of knights of light.

"W-What the heck, this is...!"

"Unbelievable, a legion type tactical-class militarized spirit...!"

Seeing the massive number of knights filling the surroundings, Kamito muttered in amazement.

The ranks of these various knights were all vastly inferior to Fianna's Georgios.

However, their numbers were greatly inflated.

Several dozen -- no, there were probably hundreds of them.

The manifested knights held shining swords and chopped apart the darkness invading the ground.

Great numbers of knights disappeared continually as they were devoured by the darkness or cut down by Nepenthes Lore's demon sword, but due to the power of their expanding numbers, the dark mud was blocked from advancing.

"Is it Milla...?"

Kamito looked up as he muttered softly.

--Suddenly at this time, the Demon Slayer stabbed into the ground shone with brilliance once more.

The body of the blade was instantly enveloped in dazzling light, illuminating the darkness of the night.

"This is..."

Kamito could feel the rushing flow of power in his body.

Via the leylines flowing underground, pure and sacred divine power was continuously poured into him.

Although the stronghold built by Fianna already carried the function of refilling the divine power of elementalists, the amount flowing into Kamito from the ground was massive divine power several dozen times that of normal.

Soon after--

The Crusaders who had trampled the darkness with their overwhelming numbers, turned into particles of light and dissipated in the air.

The mud of darkness that had turned the ground into a swamp was banished in a mere period of a minute or two.

"--Are you ready, Est?"

Kamito asked the sword in his hand.

As if answering, Terminus Est shone with maximum brightness.

Wielding the shining Demon Slayer in both hands, Kamito--

"--Let's finish this, go!"

He shouted at the young ladies, his teammates.

"Right." "Yes." "Understood."

Claire, Ellis and Rinslet nodded simultaneously.

Kamito rushed towards Nepenthes Lore who was swinging the demon sword of darkness.

In that instant, the dark demon sword sounded as the Vorpal Blast flashed.

A merciless lightning strike at maximum power, this was without a doubt a red herring intending to pin down Kamito's movements.

Dodging it would be easy -- However, Kamito advanced directly instead.

"Wait a minute, Kamito!?"

Claire cried out in surprise.

Kamito smiled fearlessly and swung the sacred sword in his hand.

"--Don't worry. Given the Est and I currently, we *can slice it apart*!"

As the Demon Slayer flashed with brilliance, the dark lightning was easily sliced in half.

"Ohhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Just like that, Kamito kicked the ground to gain speed.

His body felt exceptionally light. Every time he stepped on the ground, divine power coursed through his entire body, delivered from the leylines.

Before him, Nepenthes Lore seemed to be displaying fear slightly. However, the opponent in Kamito's eyes was not the dark monster but the elemental waffe held in its hand -- the Vorpal Sword.

"--I have arrived, Restia!"

As he yelled, Kamito performed an astounding series of strikes.

With an intense showering of sparks, the Demon Slayer clashed against the Vorpal Sword.

Kamito's high speed attacks overwhelmed Nepenthes Lore's regeneration rate, causing the humanoid dark matter to begin collapsing.

(...This is the end!)

Gripping Terminus Est tightly, Kamito entered a low attack stance.

This was a purely offensive stance, full of openings, that sacrificed all defenses.

Nepenthes Lore's arm regressed into an ugly dark mass as it approached Kamito head on.

However, Kamito had absolute confidence.

He trusted his most precious comrades.

"Freezing fangs of ice, go forth and pierce -- Freezing Arrow!"

Numerous freezing arrows rained down, shot from afar.

The arm reaching out was frozen by the magical ice and nailed to the ground.

Nepenthes Lore roared as it prepared to crush Kamito beneath its massive body--

"Keeper of the burning furnace, release your wrath -- Flame Chain!"

The spiral burning Flametongue restrained Nepenthes Lore's entire body.

Just as the dark masses stopped moving -- in that instant, Kamito seized the opportunity to press near.

Lightly lowering his posture, he leaped -- !

"Courageous wind, grant your blessing to the brave warrior -- Sylphid Feathers!"

Having leapt, Kamito was pushed by the wind released by Ellis' spirit magic.

(*...The way I am now, will I be able to perform the sixteen hit combo*?)

Slashing at Nepenthes Lore's massive body, Kamito smiled fearlessly.

Not intended to be used against elementalists, this was a destructive sword technique for destroying massive spirits.

Three years ago, taught by the Dusk Witch Greyworth, an ultimate secret technique.

It was originally a dual wielding sword skill -- nevertheless, Kamito in his current state was able to imitate it.

(I was only able to master this technique thanks to you, Restia...)

The Demon Slayer in Kamito's hand gave off light which overwhelmed darkness--

Instantly, Kamito's figure disappeared.

"--Bursting Blossom Spiral Blade Dance - Sixteen Consecutive Strikes!"

Numerous slashes streaked brightly against the darkness of the night.

Dancing in midair, Kamito unleashed a furious wave of sixteen consecutive attacks.

Reduced to a dark mass, Nepenthes Lore's body was being sliced and chopped, gradually collapsing.

"That sword skill--"

"Could it be, Ren Ashbell's!?"

Watching from the ground, Claire and Ellis exclaimed in surprise.

This was precisely the sword technique displayed three years ago at the Blade Dance festival by Ren Ashbell, the strongest blade dancer.

With a thunderous boom, Nepenthes Lore fell upon the ground as black mud. Even though it barely maintained humanoid form, its movements were rather sluggish now.

Still possessing one remaining arm, it swung the demon sword of darkness--

"--You, dispassionate Queen of Steel, the demon slaying sacred sword!"

A spirit language incantation could be heard coming from above.

"--By the sacred light of punishment, may my enemies be crushed!"

Descending, Kamito pierced the dark mass with the Demon Slayer in his hand.

A bright and intense explosion occurred, instantly filling his view.

In that instant, Nepenthes Lore's material body was completely destroyed.

Clang--

Restia's elemental waffe, the Vorpal Sword, was embedded in the ground like a tombstone.

The demon sword of darkness then started dissipating into the air as particles of light--

"Restia!?"

Before she fully disappeared, Kamito grabbed the demon sword's hilt.

"...Guh, ah... Ahhhhhhhhhh!"

The leather glove started melting with a sizzling sound as Kamito felt the searing pain of burns.

Kamito's spirit seal was displaying a rejection reaction.

"Kamito, what are you doing!?"

Claire cried out with shock.

Even so, Kamito did not let go. Enduring the pain, he infused divine power into the sword.

--Don't do this, Kamito. You can no longer touch me.

Starting from the tip of the black blade, the demon sword of darkness was gradually disappearing as if melting.

Restia's voice sounded mournful as it resounded in Kamito's mind.

"Shut up... I'm not going to let go. *I will absolutely never let you go*!"

--What a fool. Clearly I am no longer the same me that you knew.

"*Is that really true*?"

--Huh?

"Have you really become a totally different existence from the Restia in the very beginning?"

Despite the frighteningly intense pain, Kamito embraced the gradually disappearing demon sword.

...Three years ago on that day, something happened.

Then she changed -- that was indisputable.

(But...)

--He could feel it without a doubt.

The existence of her who had brought Kamito light when he was young.

"Kamito..."

"...!?"

A faint trembling voice.

Kamito felt warmth embraced in his arms.

By the time he noticed, Kamito found himself embracing a girl instead of a demon sword.

The darkness spirit, a girl in a dark dress.

"...I'm sorry, Kamito. The me you know is no longer."

Her dusk-colored eyes wavered as she made a lonely smile.

Her body gradually disappeared.

"...Let me tell you. Three years ago on that day, what wish you tried to make."

Restia's soft lips lightly touched Kamito's lips.

"--!"

Plunged into the paralyzing sweetness--

Kamito's mind was swept into the memories of that day.

Part 4

--Those were lost memories.

The final memories of their happy days together.

The final day of the Blade Dance festival when the strongest blade dancer, Ren Ashbell, obtained victory.

Just before gaining an audience with the Elemental Lords--

"--Hey Kamito, I hope you can realize my Wish."

"Yeah, I only won for your sake, Restia."

The boy answered innocently.

Replying to the most important girl in the world to him.

"However, once you make that wish, you will make the world your enemy, you know?"

"...I don't care. As long as it is for your sake, Restia."

The boy did not waver.

Even with the world as his enemy--

As long as this girl stayed by his side, that was enough.

"So, what is the wish?"

"Well--"

The darkness spirit girl lightly brought her lips close to the boy's ear.

Then--

Epilogue

Part 1

The night of the intense battle had passed and the next dawn arrived. After a simple breakfast--

Milla Bassett abruptly brought up an issue.

"...Is that really okay, Milla?"

"It has already been decided."

Enduring the gazes of everyone present, Milla nodded.

"Having lost the Crusaders sealed in the Eye, I have no way of winning the Blade Dance."

Fundamentally, summoning spirits through a stronghold's leylines was completely outrageous.

Milla's left eye had cracked and lost its luster.

This was her decision as one who was no longer an elementalist--

Withdrawal from the Blade Dance festival--

"But what will you do from here on?"

Claire asked.

No longer an elementalist. Where could she go?

"I can no longer return to the Principality of Rossvale, because I have betrayed my home country's hopes and expectations... However, it is fine. I will find new meaning for myself."

Although her expression was stiff as always, her tone of voice sounded a bit cheerful.

"If you wish, please come to my home. We can hire you as a Laurenfrost maid."

Rinslet swept a hand through her hair as she spoke.

"Don't. The Laurenfrost lands are not only in the countryside but also cold as hell. Rather than that, come to my home. To restore the House of Elstein to its former glory requires additional manpower."

"W-What did you say!?"

Rinslet glared furiously at Claire.

"...I am most grateful for the offers. I will bear them in mind."

Milla nodded.

"Fufu, you can also live with me and Kamito-kun, the three of us together~"

"Wait a minute, what do you mean by you and Kamito living together!?"

Instantly, Claire and Fianna's quarrelling erupted.

Kamito could do nothing but sigh.

"Kamito..."

Milla looked up at Kamito and spoke up.

"Hmm?"

"After the Blade Dance festival ends, will you continue your story?"

"Ah sure, as much as you want."

Kamito patted Milla lightly on the head and smiled wryly.

Milla's words just now sounded almost like Kamito's catchphrase back when he was young.

"--As the Rupture Division's allied team, please obtain victory to the very end."

"Of course."

Kamito agreed and the young ladies nodded.

As they nodded, Milla handed over the two magic stones in her possession to Kamito.

Her own as well as the one taken from the member of the Sacred Spirit Knights.

Kamito accepted it carefully.

Soon after the magic stones left her possession, the forced transfer magic activated.

A magic circle appeared beneath Milla's feet as her body dissipated into particles of light--

"Goodbye--"

Several seconds later, the leader of the Rupture Division, Milla Bassett, disappeared from the competition.

"..."

For a while, silence persisted--

"...Our blade dance has not ended. Or rather, this is simply the beginning."

The first to speak was Claire.

"Yeah, that's right."

Kamito nodded as the other girls all looked up.

"According the wind spirits' report, the third day's situation has undergone major changes."

"Finally time for the real blade dance to begin..."

Hearing Ellis' report, Rinslet nodded.

The majority of teams had constructed all kinds of strongholds and had entered the stage of information gathering.

Starting from today, the fourth, the battles would likely intensify.

"Amongst the twenty-four teams, nine have been eliminated, including the Rupture Division. Right now, the team holding the greatest number of magic stones is undoubtedly Team Inferno."

"We're really behind now eh."

"...That's right. We have to be more proactive."

"By the way, Kamito--"

"What?"

Claire glared at Kamito angrily--

"Y-You, a-again you k-kiss, k-kissed that darkness spirit girl!"

"Uh, no, that..."

Kamito stammered.

"That's right, what was that about!?"

"Hmm, I believe there is a need to clear this up no matter what!"

"Kamito-kun!"

Rinslet, Ellis and Fianna pressed on the offensive.

"Kamito, that spirit is so sly. Please kiss me too."

"E-Est!?"

As Kamito sat in state of shock--

"...?"

Lightly, a black feather fluttered down from the air.

Noticing it suddenly, Kamito grabbed it with his fingers.

"Restia..."

As he gazed upon this black feather--

Kamito once again recalled the memories he caught sight of.

(Three years ago, the wish I made for her was...)

Part 2

Restia proceeded to utter the absolutely forbidden wish.

"--I hope you can assassinate them. The five Elemental Lords."

Afterword

--If possible, Kamito, I wish to die by your hand.

To all readers who bought this book, I would like to express my sincere gratitude.

I hereby present the sixth installment of "Seirei Tsukai no Blade Dance," the "Reminisced Darkness Spirit"!

Due to Est's resurrection, Kamito and his team were able to defeat the formidable Knights of the Dragon Emperor. Just as they were enjoying brief respite, they received the Rupture Division's proposal for an alliance. Heading off to negotiate, Kamito and Claire were intercepted by the mysterious black knight -- as well as the contracted spirit of the past.

"This is the final opponent I've prepared for you."

The awakening of Kamito's childhood memories. The encounter with the Rupture Division -- Milla Bassett.

Finally, the strongest enemy attacked Team Scarlet...!

The Blade Dance main competition is reaching a climax, hence there is a greatly increased amount of battle scenes this time.

Also, the original preview in Volume 5 for the next subtitle was "The Strongest Blade Dancer (tentative)." Due to various reasons (*the author's carelessness), it had to be changed... I am most sorry (sweating).

No matter what, in the second story of the "Blade Dance story arc," changes will be made to my original plans. So please rest assured, everyone. Volume 7 will be attacking with great vigor in spirit!

Just to let you know. "Seirei Tsukai no Blade Dance" has also been adapted into a flash game. I, Shimizu Yuu, slacked off to play it for a bit and now I'm addicted. I really recommend it for people who likes to pop bubble wrap packaging, you really must try it.

Also, BROCCOLI-sama has produced a microfiber towel for a *Blade Dance* character (Claire). As the first promotion product created, I am very happy about this. That cuteness and healing feeling is really recommended.

Acknowledgements. Firstly, thanks goes to Sakura Hanpen-sensei who drew all these cute illustrations again. I am utterly grateful. Restia on the cover is truly an angel. Arranging the covers of the six published volumes side by side, I feel really happy.

Also, thanks goes to Umeda Natsuno-sensei who drew adorable SD characters. Your creations are so cute that I even felt a delusion wanting to ask as certain company whose name starts with N to produce a series of figures. Thank you for your continued support.

Shouji-san, the Sephiroth of the publishing industry (* because you're always dressed like some kind of final boss from an RPG), thank you for handling all the troubles I've brought upon you. My thanks really cannot be expressed fully in words.

And of course, my greatest thanks goes to all the readers.

Starting from the end of last year, thanks to everyone's support, this series began to go through additional reprints and now reached the sixth volume successfully.

My intention was to write about "cute beauties" x " hot-blooded battles" -- I won't forget this series' initial premise and I'll work hard towards the goal of "more love, more comedy, battles above all!" So from here onwards, I hope everyone can continue your support. Your comments in the text message survey have been the greatest encouragement. Sakura Hanpei-sensei and I are very happy to receive them!

Okay, as for the usual popularity poll, as the cover of Volume 5, Est won the number one spot with over 400 votes. Greatly surpassing all other candidates. Will the Est faction continue their dominance?

In second place we have the stern and grumbling beauty, captain of the knights, Ellis Fahrengart. She looks really cute hugging Scarlet (even though Scarlet feels very troubled). Slightly behind in number three is Rinslet the high-class Laurenfrost young lady, the perfect superwoman who excels in all maid skills including cooking. A bit of a waste for a high-class lady. In fourth place is tsundere hell cat girl Claire Rouge. For some reason, the fearless girl who is always featured in special fan service scenes. Even though she keeps wanting to turn Kamito into charcoal, she really is a very gentle girl.

In fifth place is the darkness spirit, Restia. Even though rumors are rife that she is Kamito's one and only true love and legal wife, what is the actual truth? She really looks like an angel on the Volume 6 cover.

Next in sixth is Fianna Ray Ordesia Her Highness the imperial princess. She not only holds the advantage of knowing Kamito's true identity but is also one of the more womanly members of Team Scarlet. Mature and adorable at the same time. In seventh place we have our protagonist Kazehaya Kamito. When will we be able to witness him cross-dressing? (Secretly winks at Sakura Hanpei-sensei).

In actual fact, the difference between third and sixth place is very minute (29 votes), so in this massive free-for-all, it would not be surprising for the rankings to change any time without warning. Others such as Leonora and Muir are also quite popular.

The survey can be entered by using the QR code at the end of the Afterword. Please try it if you wish to support your favorite character. Starting with this volume, we are accommodating smart phones.

As for the author's recent news, lately I've been zealously collecting sample food models. Those imitations that restaurants put out to display their menu items. The latest ones are so exquisite they make me really touched.

And so, let us meet again at the next installment, "The Strongest Blade Dancer (tentative)"!

--The author has already received notice to start writing the next draft! (Concentrated linework appears on face like special effects.)

Shimizu Yuu, January 2012

Illustrator's Afterword

Welcome for the first time and welcome back for returning readers. This is hello from Sakura Hanpen!

I never expected it'd be a Restia cover this time!

Having progressed to Volume 6, many mysteries have started to unravel and building up towards a climax. I'm really struggling with the urge to find out what happens next.

Restia-san really has too many secrets!?

As for the cover, due to having read so many descriptions of Restia's black wings, I drew wings on her on impulse...!

In order to depict Restia's maidenly cuteness and seductive feeling, I put in everything I've got!

Well then, I guess it's about time to say bye to the readers!

Who will be next on the cover...!?

Shimizu-san, I am really looking forward to the next volume! I really want to read it as soon as possible...!

So, let's meet again next volume ~ (w)